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Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 15, ISSUE 27
5TH JANUARY 2019

**KABANDHA
THE DEMON
AND THE
MURDERS
IN THE TEMPLE**

BY SHASHI
KADAPA
TERROR
IN THE
VILLAGE...

**INSOMNIA
CHRISTOPHER
T DABROWSKI**

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**AL GORE
HAS LEFT
THE
BUILDING**

BY
CARLTON
HERZOG
TAKE ME
TO THAT
FUTURE
PLACE...

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by
Gavin Chappell

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Schlock! Webzine

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Carlton Herzog, Shashi Kadapa, Kevin O'Brien, A Merritt, Charles B Stilson*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Welcome to Schlock! the webzine for science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

Vol. 15, Issue 27
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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels, and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Rakshasa tel que représenté dans un spectacle Yakshagana* (Karki Krishna Hasyagar) by Mr. Manohara Upadhyaya. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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EDITORIAL

This week, Sebastian and Kassi confront a mystery. In medieval India, Bala struggles to solve the mystery of the murders in the temple. A magical trip into the future provides an apocalyptic vision. A man uncovers the terrifying tale of two doctors. And sleepless nights end in horror.

Team Girl meet the fearsome, faceless, rubbery nightgaunts. Madame Mandilip strikes again. And Polaris and his companions escape the Sardanians into the terrible ice wastes.

—Gavin Chappell

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



**"THIS YEAR I'M GOING TO DEVELOP A GOOD RELATIONSHIP
WITH MY BODY...PARTS."**

Vincent is an artist who has consistently been on assignment in the art world for over twenty years. Throughout his career he has acquired a toolbox of diverse skills (from freehand drawing to digital design, t shirt designer to muralist). His styles range from the wildly abstract to pulp style comics.

In 2013, his work in END TIMES won an award in the Best Horror Anthology category for that year. When Vincent is not at his drawing board he can be found in the classroom teaching cartooning and illustration to his students at Westchester Community College in Valhalla NY.

He lives in Mamaroneck NY with his wife Jennie and dog Skip.

<https://www.freelanced.com/vincentdavis>

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SEBASTIAN AND THE OTHER KASSI by Ste Whitehouse

Part Two

Kassi and Fyonne are enjoying some time together when they are captured by The Governmentals, the governing body of the land who believe Kassi has stolen a precious artefact. In fact Sebastian has met the actual thief, Dread Sonja, who stole it under the mistaken belief that she was helping fellow proletarians. The Raji is held in a well-protected tower. Sebastian and Sonja work together to steal back the artefact unaware that Kassi is to do the same.

Sebastian and Dread Sonja had travelled the few miles to the bracken heathland surrounding the tower. It was positioned well. Able to observe anyone approaching it during the day and so scarily imposing an edifice as to incur a reluctance to scale it at night. They had found a small collection of hills, little more than large mounds, 90 degrees clockwise, and from that position Sebastian had ample scope to see the south side of the edifice and its stout girders reaching upwards. Ten, perhaps twelve, floors of emptiness atop which sat solid looking walls of brick and concrete.

“They brought you here?” he asked the woman again, unsure that she had spoken the truth the first time.

“Yes, sugah. They had me bring this artefact too them. After the ease of retrieving it, the hardest thing about the whole adventure was that walk up those stairs. Seven hundred steps. Ah counted them on the way down. Seven hundred fucking steps.”

In her honeyed tones the ‘fucking’ was somehow less explosive.

Sebastian considered the tower. Sonja had told him that her second job had been to ‘retrieve’ this Raji and the proletariat had given specific instructions, directions, which meant that the heist was nothing more than a stroll into a secure room within the Town Hall and, as she had been given the combination beforehand, hey presto the safe was open.

As he scanned the tower, wishing that he could penetrate the thick walls, the woman continued to explain what she had seen. The layout and what she recognised as magical implementations. Hand scanners and lasers, large geometrical spheres, which—for the life of him—SOUNDED like disco balls, within the secured room. She was also astute enough to recognise that scratches on the floor meant that the whole layout on the top floor changed. Despite his misgivings Sebastian was impressed. In spite of her appearance Sonja was actually helpful.

“But there is no way in,” he heard her say finally. He realised that she had probably been speaking to him for a while.

“Oh, the getting in part is the easiest,” he replied offhand, disturbed by a faint buzzing sensation that was disrupting his thoughts. “What I need to do is see if these walls of yours change drastically.”

“And how do you expect to do that, sugah!?” Sonja asked.

“Oh. A night or two’s inspection should cover it.” He smiled—although Sonja would never have noticed it as such—as he realised what the buzzing was.

“Two nights!” Grov’Een’s voice rose an octave or two in panic. “The ceremony is in less than a week. If the Raji has not been returned by then, all efforts to remain in control will fail and...”

“I know. I know. The end of days. Pestilence, famine, war, bad TV ratings.”

The charmless man’s hand hovered over the small box of magic he carried at all times. Supposedly, it would cause Kassi great pain if he were tempted to turn the large red dial. Of course, once she knew that she had done all in her power to MAKE him turn up the dial. Once more his fingers fluttered over the circle hesitating only by a fraction. Kassi smiled warmly. Bizarrely THAT made him nervous and his hand retreated of its own volition.

“Two nights in which to prepare my body for the ordeal ahead; or did you perhaps think that I could just walk up to the tower and defeat these men without calling upon my... inner diva?”

Grov’Een looked at her with suspicion, but finally relented. After all, if she failed the Governmental was finished and if she succeeded it had cost them nothing, other than an inordinate amount of food for the two women and a sense of unease as they happily spent each night together. He had considered separating them but the lass looked slightly more weathered and much more capable than the Town Guard; they had been shown to be inept so many times that he was sure the girl could actually walk out of there at any time and it was only her sense of propriety that made her stay. Still, he was a politician, and used to manipulating the wellbeing of others. It was just that he had a feeling that it was HE that was been manipulated, if only he could see how.

“Great. Well, Fy and I shall ‘retire’,” she actually drew little quotation marks in the air, “for the night and then tomorrow we travel.”

Sonja stumbled yet again in the shadow. She was sure that Sebastian was leading her a circuitous route to spite her. She was even sure that this foul marshland was exactly the same as the one he had led her across not ten minutes before. She would definitely deserve a bath after tonight. A bath and a day’s rest to recover from the night’s work. God knew how Kassi put up with him; it. She was about to speak, asking if Sebastian had a clue where they were, when the land fell away and a section of chain-linked fence stood in their way. There was already a slit opening up the fence.

“That was quick,” Sonja said, impressed.

“I did this last night,” Sebastian replied, a hint of displeasure in his tone. “No one appears to have discovered the cut.”

“All the better for us, eh, sugah?”

Sebastian did not reply. Instead he slipped through the cut and held it open for the woman.

“Mah. How gentlemanly of y’all. Makes a lady feel ahl tingly inside.”

Sebastian tried not to blush.

He indicated with an arm. “The sewage access is over there. Wait here and guard my exit. I should hate to make it through all of the traps above only to be sideswiped by the guards down here.”

“Of course, sugah. This is not my first dance.”

He nodded curtly and scurried over to the small drainage system. With a little reorganisation the mech could move through the piping and eventually up the inside of one of the steel legs onto the top of the platform. He paused a second before entering the foul smelling liquid.

Kassi waited while the two guards decided who should stand where. She limbered up, excited to be there at the perimeter of the tower furthest from the steel leg that took people upwards to the top. The night was cool and her breath hung in the still air, a pale ghost fading away. Finally, too eager to wait any longer she handed the steel cuffs the men had used to ‘restrain’ her back to the younger and stepped through the cut links of the fence. The second guard foolishly waved his key as if to say ‘I need to unlock the cuffs’ even as she strolled up to the Tower.

The ground beyond was mostly flat and strewn with bushes and wild grasses. Harsh beams of artificial light flooded the one steel support and trickles of it reached out like errant fingers probing the darkness. The moonline was barely visible above a spray of dark clouds spiralling around Ah’kis’ light source. Crouching over she slowly made her way, zigzagging from clump to clump to bush; always aware that one glance from the group of guards just over a hundred feet away would be fatal.

She passed the worn path that circled the tower, a path tonight devoid of traffic, and hurried into the deep shadow of the nearest support. Feeling safer from view, Kassi stood a little more erect but slowed her pace down. All it would take was one stupid footstep and she would break her leg; again. Fyonne would be pissed and Sebastian? Well, the mechanoid would allow her no respite. He already distinctly hummed like a lift door opening when he thought it would annoy her most—which was most of the time. One little leap; and a more lengthy fall, had put her in the hands of the Watch for over ten weeks. Of course it had its compensations; Fyonne for a start.

She stopped. One of the guards stood, stretching as though ready to start his patrol, but another guard told him to sit and he did so. Kassi continued until she came to the worn steel structure. Considering it was open to the elements and at least 10000 years old, it was remarkably solid and sturdy. The Builders knew how to do things in those days. Without a pause Kassi found a couple of handholds and hoisted herself up, her feet easily resting on a couple of over large bolt heads.

Carefully she inched her way upwards. Always ensuring that each foot or handhold was secure before moving on. She thought, abstractly, about the height; the fall. Her right leg ached a little, a residue of the break, but despite her experience she continued to climb. Kassi had decided years before that to last as a warrior you needed to have perfect equilibrium between utter and complete foolishness and restraint. Foolishness to be able to contemplate such a climb and restraint to do so correctly.

She had learnt each movement of her sword like a dance; each turn of her body like a ballerina, but also she had learnt to fight with the men on a Saturday night after the pubs had shut. Then ballet was just a term; alongside chaos, blunt force trauma, and fuck. Despite, Sebastian would say because of, the fall Kassi attacked the ascent with vigour, and soon the warrior was slipping over the barriers and facing the solid south wall of the tower. No light shone, the only entrance to her right was built so well that none spilled from within.

“Well, you took your time,” a voice said to her left.

“The men could not decide amongst themselves who was to wait close at hand. I suspect they believed death would follow if they stepped too close.” She turned and saw Sebastian, his blue sensors dimly glowing like two sapphire eyes, staring at her with what could said to be love. She knelt and the two friends hugged each other, despite anatomical difficulties.

“Well, death does tend to follow you around luv,” the robot said eventually.

She smiled, prepared for anything.

They waited.

“How’s Fyonne?”

“Well. This Governmental holds her hostage.”

Sebastian barked a little laugh. “They do not know you at all well.”

“They’ve heard of Sonja. Well, Sonja as me. How is she, by the way?”

Before Sebastian could answer there was a cry from below and an alarm sounded.

“You’ll be seeing her soon. Ask her then.”

Kassi stepped forward, ready.

Sebastian added, “I will admit she is one point seven minutes later than I thought.”

Kassi rolled her shoulders. “So, the door?”

As if they had heard her a handful of men spilled out of the doorway blinking in the darkness as stark yellow light fell as a slab onto the long balcony.

“A lot more than yesterday’s two,” Sebastian muttered. “Allow me.”

He curled two 'arms' around Kassi and hauled her up and over his back while climbing over the railing. In one fluid movement they were moving downwards. Sebastian had been designed to exist outside of Ark Six where centrifugal force constantly tried its best to fling him away from the Ark's exterior. A small matter of a hundred or so feet and gravity meant little to him. As they neared the ground Kassi said, "Drop me off here, will you?"

Below Sonja was parrying five guards, circling around and doing a good job of defending herself despite the fact that she was overwhelmed and outflanked. Kassi dropped the last ten feet and hit two of the guards squarely on their backs. She rolled up and used her momentum to drive her right fist into a third man's cheekbone, feeling it shatter. Spinning, she caught the fourth's legs, kicking them from under him before facing the last. He swung a large heavy broadsword. Lifting it high overhead with the aim of cleaving Kassi in two. She merely stepped forward and head-butted him. Sword and man collapsed together.

"Sugah!" Sonja said excitedly.

Kassi raised a finger to her lips and kicked out at the fourth man, catching him across his forehead. "Okay, now we can go." She grabbed the scantily clad woman and dragged her back across the brushland towards the men she had left. "Sebastian gave you ONE simple order. Guard the access tunnel and what did you do?"

"Ah thought that a di-verh-sion mahbe needed," she replied petulantly.

"Admit it, you got bored." Kassi smiled. Sebastian had thought she would. "Doesn't matter. We have some people who will love to see you."

Kassi led Sonja back to the cellar where she and Fyonne had been held. No guards were at the door, which was open, and they met no one as Kassi wove her way through the dank corridors before finding the door leading downwards. It opened onto the large room the men had first brought her to. Now all the men were standing awkwardly to one side, weaponless, with Fyonne sitting prettily whilst Sebastian glared at the men. Of course his smooth featureless face should have looked blank but the men somehow understood his anger and stayed close to the wall as far from the bot as possible.

"You found the place alright, then?" Kassi asked.

"Your directions were excellent. Thank you."

"Hi, Fy. Any food left?" The Watch Mother sat before an empty plate. "For 'Kassi' here." Kassi indicated the redhead behind her. As the other woman gathered together a few morsels on a clean plate, Kassi slumped heavily into a chair and smiled at the men.

"Well. A dozen men awaited us at the top of the tower. It was a dozen, wasn't it, Sebastian?" she asked the machine.

"Actually, ten."

She smiled again. "Apologies. So TEN men awaited us."

The old man Grov'Een had enough courage to ask. "You could not retrieve the item?"

"Not this night. I mean Sebastian and myself COULD have fought our way through, but there were at least another ten or more below; and some had wands. I don't think even Kassi here—sorry Sonja—would face five wands. After all, her smooth flesh only goes so far."

The old man's face showed a deep struggle within. "Then we are unable to ratify Counsellor Darv'Een."

Kassi spread her hands profusely. "I didn't say we haven't got the Raji. Merely that we couldn't retrieve it tonight."

The old man looked startled and a few of the other Governmentals stepped forward cautiously. "You... you have the Raji?" one asked, trembling in either fear or anticipation.

"We do," Sebastian replied flatly.

"We picked it up yesterday," Kassi added with extra smile. She was enjoying this.

"Both of us."

"But how?" Grov'Een asked.

"Well, I realised that these tracker bracelets of yours caused some interference when placed together. A little niggly buzz in our minds."

"So Kassi was able to contact me,"

"With buzzes?" the old man said incredulously.

"A little something called Morse Code. Don't ask." Kassi raised a hand. "Suffice to say we arranged to meet at the tower last night."

One of the guards spoke out. "But you were here all night. We heard your..." He blushed vividly.

Fyonne handed the plate to Sonja and uttered a few loud sighs of pleasure. The guards reddened even more. The old man looked furious but the other Governmentals had heard Kassi mention acquiring the Raji.

"You have it?" they almost babbled. "But the traps. The locks?"

"For a start, scaling the tower was easy, and the plate that supposedly read palm-scans?" She looked at Sebastian who continued.

"The need for various people to access the tower precluded any sophisticated electronic reader. It was merely necessary to press upon the plate."

The room looked confused.

Kassi explained. “Too many people used the door for any reader to be able to keep up. It was a bluff.”

“Much like the pressure pads within. The walls were set to alter, but again, too complicated a pattern, and no one would ever find the centre of the tower, and so the walls rotated back and forth in two configurations.”

“And for the rotating walls to work properly there could be no pressure pads on the floor.”

“The final door did actually have a numeric keypad,” Sebastian said flatly.

“Although it was only four numbers long and most people can only remember 1 2 3 4 or 0 0 0 0.” She gave Grov’Een a dazzling smile. “It was 1 2 3 4.”

“Inside the vault proper there actually were pressure pads. But I have existed on the shell of this Ark for 10000 years. A little wall of concrete was quite simple to hold onto.”

“And I hung onto him and voila! One grapple hook, a little swing and we swapped the Raji for a false one.”

“I have access to limited 3D Printing,” the mechanoid said although no one understood exactly what it was he was speaking about. “When the coronation arises their own Raji will be proved a fake.”

“It was then easy to climb the rope up to the skylight, which is surprisingly easy to open from the inside. Of course, an alarm would sound and the lasers would begin but we were long gone by then; and with no indication we had ever been there.”

“Until the ceremony in two days’ time,” Sebastian added.

“Still, it was rather odd that tonight everything was different. Last night the guards constantly patrolled in twos barely a hundred yards between them. It was tough, believe you me, to sneak past them; and none waited in the maze.”

“Why should they? To do so meant that the mechanisms running the maze had to be shut down.”

“So why would they go to all that trouble; just for this ONE night.” Kassi hoped that someone would be bright enough before Sebastian stepped in and explained it all.

“They knew you were coming,” one of the Governmentals whispered.

Kassi was pleased. It was good that at least some of the ruling class was observant enough. “What you failed to inform me was that this Tower of yours acts as a sort of bank. A depository for all things valuable.”

“We do not use it,” Grov’Een said but conceded. “The ‘Others’ use it so.”

“Of course, and they keep much that is important to them; including meetings and documents. There is a complete wall of small alcoves that even Sonja would have been able to cling onto.” The red haired woman looked up from her plate, upset. “And it is filled with papers going back years. Of course Sebastian and myself had all night, and it wasn’t particularly hard to decipher their filing system.”

Sebastian held up a slim file of papers. “This pertains to correspondence between a Governmental and the people who stole the Raji.”

Sebastian side-stepped Grov’Een and handed the papers to the next in a long chain of command.

Kassi continued speaking. “You did not tell me, Herr Grov’Een, that you had run for office of Senior but came second.”

The old man looked sickly. “It was, is, not pertinent. We live in a democracy here.”

“One that had supplied you with a vote you did not agree upon.”

The other Governmentals glanced from the papers to the older man. One indicated that the guards should move surreptitiously towards him.

“The man given the position of Senior is a buffoon!” he exclaimed.

One of the other Governmentals looked up at him. “And for that you would betray us to these scoundrels? For a seat as a puppet upon their throne? Can you not recall what life was like before when they ruled the land?”

It looked as though Grov’Een was about to embark on a speech but suddenly he just folded up in defeat. One lone guard led him away with over vigorous tugs.

One of the men came over to the women and machine. “The bracelets.”

“Already off.” Kassi showed her arm and Fyonne did the same.

“How can we ever thank you?” he asked and immediately regretted it.

“Well, coin always goes down well, but...” She added quickly catching Sebastian’s eye. “We overstayed at the inn, so if you could pay the bill we would be most grateful.”

“Done!” The man hurried off to re-join his compatriots.

Fyonne looked at Kassi sternly. “You knew, didn’t you?”

Kassi made a face and shifted uneasily under her lover’s gaze. “Technically, no. We knew that someone was using my name and that she was here in the area, but believe me, if I had thought for one second that there was any danger to you I would never have brought you here.” She kissed Fyonne lightly on the cheek. “We never thought that the Governmentals would do such extreme things as kidnapping and holding us in a cellar.”

Sebastian tried to rescue his friend. “When Sonja stole the money for these ‘proletariat’ we decided to stay a little longer. It is my fault. I am sorry.”

“My Gods! I thought that you were enjoying my company SO much that we stayed an extra two weeks!” Fyonne said unhappily.

Kassi said gingerly. “I did enjoy the rest. AND I didn’t actually do anything until last night so technica...”

Fyonne kissed her fully on the lips just to stop her saying technically. “This does NOT mean that I am no longer angry.”

Kassi smiled warmly; she was already looking forward to makeup sex. She then turned to Sonja.

“Now as for you.” She felled her with a good left hook. “If you EVER take my name again we will leave you in the mess you find yourself. Understand?”

The redhead looked up at Kassi with wide emerald eyes and ashen face. She bit her lower lip tenderly and nodded. Kassi suddenly understood why such a face, combined with heaving bosom and wild cascading hair and little clothing, could appeal to certain people. She felt a dampness below and turned away from Sonja before she did or said something Fyonne would misconstrue.

“Right, well, I reckon we’ve an hour before this lot get their act together. That should be plenty of time to eat a hearty meal at the inn and drink it dry. After all, it’s on their tab now.”

THE END

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Now [available](#) from Schlock! Publications.

KABANDHA THE DEMON AND THE MURDERS IN THE TEMPLE by Shashi Kadapa

The *dwarpalaka* (keeper of the temple gates) heard the faint tinkle of anklets as a soft voice crooned a song. He jerked up from his vigil and stared into the dark forest beyond the temple walls. The singing and the sound of the anklets grew louder and then started fading as the voice receded.

Against his military training, he opened the temple doors, and stealthily stepped out. A girl in a tight fitting saree held a lamp just beyond the gate. The flickering light and the shadows highlighted her form. He could make out a strip of cloth around her waist and the piece that held her tight breasts.

Stiff with anticipation, he followed her as she walked to the village square where the banyan tree spread out. She had disappeared and he stood, impatient and yearning.

The winter wind that swept from the fields on the outskirts bit him harshly like a wasp.

“Where was the girl?” he muttered angrily.

She came out from behind the tree and held out her arms. Maddened with lust, he embraced her, kissing her on the mouth with ardent fervour.

Then he convulsed, foaming and frothing as her poison entered his body, choking and paralysing his muscles. She pushed him away, drew her knife, slicing his member and other body parts.

The villagers found him early morning, bathed in blood, his insides and tongue torn out, the face distorted in pain.

This was the fourth death in the village.

Terror in the Village

The villagers gathered under the tree, looking with terror at the mangled remains of the body. Blood had coagulated and still trickled in thick chunks. What remained of the body had turned bluish.

They were shocked at the brutality. The skin was peeled from the torso and hung limply, the intestines swung out like thick earthworms. They knew, as with the previous killings, that the brain would be scooped out.

They muttered among themselves. “Kabandha, the evil headless human eating rakshasa!”

The village *Sarpanch*, (headman), coaxed some people to put the remains on a bier. The temple *acharya* (priest) recognized the body from the uniform, anklets, and clothes as that of the doorkeeper.

He remarked, “The soldier was poisoned and then dismembered. Perhaps his body parts were eaten.”

The *sarpanch* asked, “*Guruji*. Why did he leave the temple and venture out in the night?”

The *acharya* replied, “I have no idea. No one in this village ventures out in the night. I do not know why he went out, or at whose bidding.”

“*Guruji*, what is this demon Kabandha?”

His brow furrowed with worry, the *acharya* narrated the story of the demon.

“According to the *Aranya kanda*, written by the sage Valmiki in the 4th century BCE, Kabandha was a heavenly musician, a Gandharva of exquisite beauty. He took up severe penance and won boons from the creator Lord Brahma. The boon made him invincible and he attacked the gods. The king of gods Indra cursed and pummelled Kabandha on the head, driving it into his body, turning him into a foul and misshapen being that smelled of putrefying flesh. After Kabandha begged, Indra gave him a mouth and a single eye in his belly. With no strength, he could eat only abandoned corpses. Legends say that Lord Rama on his quest for his wife Sita Devi, who was kidnapped by Ravana, freed him from his misery. However, the spirit of Kabandha still roams the earth, killing and feeding on rotting flesh like a scourge on earth.”

“But why is this demon killing in our region?”

“Well, this region is Dandkaranya, a very large forest in Vedic times, before time began. It has seen countless sages and demons over the aeons. It is our karma that has released this demon amongst us.”

The soldier’s body was quickly cremated at the river bank and the people sat in the temple courtyard.

“We will not work in the fields anymore until this demon is captured.”

“Yes,” said the cowherds. “We will not venture out to graze the cows.”

“We will close our shops until this evil demon is killed,” said the traders and the *ganiger*, (the oil mill owners).

The *sarpanch*, a retired soldier of the Vijayanagar Sāmrājya, (Vijayanagar Empire), was worried. Threats would not work here. He had promised the tax collector that a certain amount of grains would be sent. This was not going to happen as the fear of the rakshasa was strong. Four people were dead and there was nothing he could do.

Asking a horse to be saddled, he rode out with a couple of soldiers to Kampana Sthana, Dharwad, a fort of the powerful Vijayanagar Sāmrājya, where he would ask for help. The distance was about 15 *yodjana* (1 *yodjana* is 9.1 miles) through thick forests. While his soldiers were brave and loyal, they were superstitious and feared black magic and the rakshasa.

To Kampana Sthana

The *sarpanch*'s tale was met with scepticism by the *nayaka*, (captain of the army garrison). The *nayaka* took the *sarpanch* to Vir Nayaka (the viceroy) who listened quietly to the narration. He trusted the *sarpanch*, a decorated soldier who had served the Chakravarti (Emperor) valiantly and obtained the village as a *jagir*, gift for his service. The *sarpanch*'s words could not be dismissed lightly. If he did not take action, tax collection and tribute would fall.

He sent urgent summons through a messenger to Balakrishna Vishnupant Bhat, Bala, as he was called by friends, and respectfully as Panditaru by others below his caste and social standing. He was the *desa-grama-kuta*, special revenue collection officer of the Vijayanagara Sāmrājya.

Slightly paunchy, he was stocky and the top knot, dhoti, top cloth with his arms and forehead smeared in sandalwood paste identified him as a Brahmin. Like all people of his caste, Bala had spent years studying religious texts, mathematics, and accounts. He was now employed as a revenue collection officer.

He enjoyed the respect that people gave him partly due to his upper caste and partly because of his sharp intelligence. Bala liked to sit in the comfort of his office, review the records, enjoy sumptuous food and his afternoon sleep. Like all other people of those times, he had received military training and rode a horse though he liked to travel in a well-padded bullock cart.

Bala looked up from the revenue and land records that dotted his room. The messenger was impatient and saying that Vira Nayaka, Dhanyaru, (a term of respect for the Viceroy), demanded his urgent presence.

“Well, I’d better not keep Dhanyaru waiting.” He hurried to meet the Dhanyaru.

The Vir Nayaka was reading a parchment from an official. He was in a foul mood. The village of Ayyavole or Aryapura was not paying tribute. The local *sardar*, (chieftain), had run away from the village, leaving the surrounding areas to the loot of brigands and thieves.

The same problem was reported in the nearby village of Paṭṭadakallu or Raktapura. It seems a Pishacha or flesh-eating demon had the area in its grip, killing farmers, and tradesmen, and no one was safe from its evil power.

Now the *sarpanch*, a trusted and brave old soldier, had come with a similar complaint.

Balakrishna bowed low in front of the viceroy, and stood waiting.

“Balakrishna!” thundered the Nayaka. “We want you to go to Ayyavole and find out what is happening and about this flesh eating demon Kabandha.”

“Flesh eating demon, Dhanyaru? Don’t you think the army or a tantric should go? What can I, a Brahman, a revenue officer do?”

“Do not be clever, Bala. You are able to see small things that my soldiers miss. You are good in logic and accounts and can unearth hidden thefts and intrigues. My soldiers are strong and

brave, but they are not diplomats. I have received reports about this demon. I think this is something more than demons.”

“But Dhanuvaru, how can I, a Brahmin, a priest and scholar who does not bear arms, fight this demon?”

Getting vexed, the viceroy shouted, “Do you believe in flesh eating demons? Something is happening in that place. We want to know what. We are sending a posse of soldiers to protect you. My *nayaka* captain, Bhimappa Narasu will come up with you. Do not argue, leave now!”

Bala looked at Bhimappa, a towering captain, all muscles and sinew. The *nayaka* bowed.

“Namaskara Panditaru.”

The *nayaka* was resentful that he, a soldier, had to babysit a weak *pandit*. He also felt aggrieved that perhaps Dhanyaru did not consider him as a capable diplomat. Bhimappa had waged many wars and raids for his lord, won honours and respect, cared for his men, and he was an expert in arms and in battle strategy. He belonged to the Kshatriya or warrior class, he had trained to fight since he was a child and he relished battles. The innumerable scars on his body were testimony to his campaigns.

The two were at opposite poles, while Bala was a scholar who found pleasure in books, Bhimappa was a soldier who loved campaigns and battles.

Bala asked, “One question, Dhanyaru. How do the people know that it is Kabandha, a demon from Vedic times? Has anyone seen and recognized it?”

“Yes, that is what I asked. A few villagers reported seeing a headless demon eating the flesh from corpses it had killed. I doubt their story. I want you to find out.”

“As you wish, Nayakare. When do you want me to go?”

“Leave immediately.”

Somewhat mollified he continued, “Bala, the region sends a lot of tribute to our kingdom. Besides, the Bahmani Sultanate in nearby Vijayapura kingdom is waiting to invade the region. We must have the local population and their goodwill on our side. I trust you. Do not let me and our Empire down.”

Balakrishna packed his possessions, taking care to pack his writing quill, parchments and ink carefully. He was expected to send in reports and inform the Nayakaru about his findings.

Early in the morning, he went to the Vishnu temple seeking blessings from the lord, bowing to the priest to whom he narrated his story.

The priest administered *theertha* (holy water), consulted the *panchanga* (holy almanac), and sent him forth with his blessings.

“Go with a prayer in your heart and mind. Pay homage to the gods in the temples. Do not trust anyone. Do not eat or drink anything unless you are sure. There is severe danger and death where you go.”

Balakrishna bade goodbye to his wife, not sure if he would see her again. His baby daughter played with her mother unaware that her father was going away.

Dawn was breaking and the early morning sun shone on the dew-speckled fields as flocks of birds flew out from the fields. Clear rivulets flowed down the hills, sparkling with fish as they joined the mighty Krishna River.

Balakrishna was worried about the demon, the intrigue and conspiracy, and he looked at Bhimappa with trepidation. While the *nayaka* was courageous, Bala feared that the captain was very mercurial, quick with his sword and spear, and he would fire his arrow first and then wonder who he killed with his unerring aim.

Kabandha Kills Again

On the outskirts of Ayyavole, on the road that connects with Paṭṭadakallu, a group of merchants entered the forest with foreboding. This forest was the abode of Kabandha and who grabbed anything that came his way, eating flesh and bones. The group was extremely cautious and terrified. Circumventing the forest would mean adding three days to the journey. As they came to a small clearing, the leader stopped gasping in horror.

The creature stood in the clearing, his single eye glaring at them balefully, horns jutted out from his breasts, and a thick tongue emerged from the fanged stomach. It licked the lips and mouth, blood-smeared saliva dripping from the fangs. The long arms held a half-eaten carcass of a man. It uttered a terrible roar and charged the group, goring and killing them, and tearing the limb and bodies until the clearing was soaked with blood. Then it sat down to eat the fresh kill.

Only one man managed to survive. He had stopped to relieve himself and hid in horror, gazing at the bodies. He ran quickly until he entered a village, muttering incoherently about the horror before swooning from exhaustion.

The news spread quickly to Ayyavole village, and people started rushing out, packing their belongings in cart to flee to the nearest fort.

At the Ayyavole Temple

Bala and the soldiers rode down the cobbled road through the hills and came across the residents of Ayyavole as they were rushing on the road. The leading bullock cart drew up when they saw the strong posse of soldiers in full battle dress.

The sight of a Brahman with soldiers puzzled them. Bala was wearing the distinctive turban of a revenue officer and the citizens were angry that the hated tax collector had come in their hour of distress and panic.

Bala asked the leader. “Shriman (gentlemen), where are you going?”

“Away from this cursed place. The demon will kill us for sure. It just killed some merchants who were coming to our village.”

In anger they chorused, “We will not pay any taxes. You can till the fields yourself. We are leaving.”

Bala raised his hand to calm them. “We have not come to collect taxes. The soldiers have come to protect you from whatever is killing you people.

Bala continued. “You have worked for generations in these farms. You want to give away your labour out of fear for a demon?”

“What else can we do? We stay here, the demon will kill us.”

A person who Bala recognized as a trader in gold and diamonds said, “The Brahman *pandit* has not seen the demon. That is why he speaks like this.”

Bala observed that the restless crowd had calmed down on seeing the mounted soldiers. Some more speaking would coax them to stay.

He said, “You are a gold trader. What are you doing in this area? These villagers do not buy much gold.”

Flustered, the jeweller replied. “Panditaru, I was passing by and took shelter in the village.”

Bala turned to the villagers and asked, “Are you sure it is a demon? Has anyone seen it?”

The crowd pushed forward the trader who had escaped the massacre.

Proud at being the cynosure of everyone, the fellow told about the demon, the mouth in the stomach, no head, horns, and how it killed his friends and ate them.

He was a tradesman and knew how to speak and get people’s attention. After listening to the incidents, Bala asked, “How far were you when you saw the demon?”

“About 15-20 *Dhanush*, (one *dhanush* is 2 yards).”

“When did you look up from the bushes?”

“When my people were killed and there was silence.”

“So, you did not see what or who killed the traders?”

“No, Panditaru. But I saw the demon clearly. It was eating a leg.”

“What did you do then?”

“I knotted my dhoti and ran.”

“There were dry leaves in the bushes. You must have made noise as you ran?”

“Maybe, yes. I was busy saving myself and did not care about the noise.”

“But the demon, if it was really there, must have heard the noise. It would have come after you.”

“What? But it was busy eating the bodies.”

“Is it possible that it let you escape so that you could tell the story to others and force an exodus?”

“No, Panditaru. I do not know about this.”

“I can see stains of *Ahiphena* (opium), on your lips. How much do you consume every day.

The trader started stuttering and muttering. “Only a few pipes ...”

The restless crowd of villagers listened to the exchange quietly. There was some substance in what the *guruji* was saying. There was no point in running away and leaving the farms. What would they eat?

Finding safety in the armed, mounted soldiers, they turned back to their homes. Bhimappa *narasu* grudgingly admitted that the *pandit* was indeed tactful. He would have probably forced the villagers back at sword point, but the *pandit* used diplomacy to assure the villagers and win their trust. Trust and not fear was important here.

Murder Attempt at the Temple

They set camp outside the ancient temple complex in a small clearing surrounded by trees. Bhimappa placed sentries around the perimeter ensuring that each soldier was in the line of sight of at least another soldier.

The temple and the carvings were built in 7th to 10th centuries by the Chalukyas kings, creating lasting poetry in stones that survived even after 500 years. Bala had once visited far off Hampi and was amazed at the skill of the artisans and sculptors. Fine details of the idols, their expressions, fruits and flowers, animals, gods and stories from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were carved in stone.

He prayed at the shrines and temples of Durga, Ramalinga, Triyambakeshvara, and all others, making rich offerings of fruits and sweets. He offered ghee to the priests and ask them to light the lamps. He also offered gifts of dhotis, sarees, and rich embroidered cloth to the gods. He vowed to visit the nearby Pattadakal that had equally beautiful temples.

Bala rose up after prostrating in front of the Narasimha idol and dropped a flower that he had brought as an offering. As he bent down to pick it up, an arrow whizzed past his head and bounced off a pillar. He shouted and Bhimappa rushed with his sword drawn, looking around. Someone had fired the arrow from distance of almost 60 *dhanush*. It is not easy to fire so accurately at such a distance in the dark. Bala picked up the arrow taking care not to touch the head and they went back to the camp.

Bhimappa was all for riding out and hunting the archer. Bala asked him to remain quiet.

“The archer will have disappeared into the forest. There is no point in rushing after him. We will see in the morning.”

They went inside the tent and Bala saw that the arrowhead was covered with thick dry paste. Using a knife he pried a small piece and smelled it. Like many Brahmin scholars, Bala was an expert in Ayurveda herbal medicine and toxicology.

“Smells like *Gurugunji* (rosary pea) paste and dried cobra venom, a deadly poison. If this arrow had grazed my skin, I would be dead in a few hours.”

Bhimappa sneered. “Cowards use poison.”

“Maybe. It seems this demon or its supporters are expert archers, and they know about poisonous plants.”

They had dinner and they enjoyed Kheer, a thick sugary condensed milk dish with vermicelli, almonds, and cashew nuts, which a villager brought them in a large vessel. Bala had a small bowl and watched as the soldiers emptied the vessel. Bala called the soldiers and spoke to them.

“Be very careful where you go and what you drink and eat. Never venture out alone, always go in pairs. If you hear strange things in the night, let it be and do not venture to investigate.”

“Why, *panditaru*? Are you scared of the demons?”

“Whatever wants to get us is not a demon. It is human, perhaps more dangerous. Remember, we are in their territory.”

Some of the soldiers went to sleep while the others stood guard. Feeling very sleepy, he retired early and fell into a deep sleep.

He saw the demon Kabandha as it approached him on its stunted legs. The single eye in the belly glared at him as the thick tongue licked the lips. He could smell the putrid being as it drew close, the mouth and fangs snapping and opening as saliva drooled. It held Bhimappa's severed and cracked head and was scooping out the brains. He stood paralysed with fear as it reached out to grasp his hand.

He woke with a jerk to the sound of retching and vomiting. His throat was constricting and he vomited. Bhimappa who slept outside his tent was also retching. Some of the soldiers were vomiting while others rolled on the ground holding their stomach in pain.

He rushed forward, pushing them upright, forcing a stick into their throat to make them vomit. Yes, it was poison, probably castor oil seeds, crushed and mixed in the kheer that the villager had brought.

The night passed and none of the soldiers died. Their hardy constitution plus the unconventional diet where they ate anything they could find on campaigns saved them. They

were weak and it would take a couple of days for them to recover. Bala just had a small bowl and nothing happened though his stomach rumbled.

He soliloquised: “This was getting dangerous and our enemies are well organised. Killing a few villagers was one thing but attempting to murder a posse of soldiers would invite the wrath of the Sāmrajya. They want us out of this place at any cost. What are they hiding and who are the enemies?”

Bhimappa recovered the next day and Bala found him sharpening his sword.

“Panditaru, I am thinking of going to the village and beheading the villagers one by one.”

“What good will it achieve?”

“It is clear that one of them brought the kheer and they know who it is. When a few random heads roll, the truth will come out.”

“Keep quiet, Nayaka. I don’t think the villagers were involved. I have sent summons to the *sarpanch*. Let us find out.”

The *sarpanch* and other villagers came, very perturbed and diffident.

He said, “Panditaru, we came to know about the incident of poison. We had nothing to do with it.”

“Who was the person who brought the kheer? Was he one of you?”

“Yes, *panditaru*. His name is Ganesha. He comes from beyond the hills of Vatapi. He works as a labourer in the sowing and harvest season.”

“Where is he now?”

“On the night after he brought the kheer to your camp, he disappeared. Maybe he has gone back to the hills.”

“Can you send us a guide to show the way through the forest and to the hills of Vatapi?”

“I will come myself as I have hunted in the region. We have to be careful, *panditaru*. The tribe of Chenchus and the Chandalas reside in these regions.”

“What about these tribes?”

“The Chenchus are forest tribes, hunters and expert archers who do not cultivate land. All this is their territory. We pay them a small amount of grains at every harvest and they leave us alone. However, if we enter their territory without informing them, then we are dead.”

“Expert archers, uh? They use sharp stones for the arrowheads?”

“No, *panditaru*. They import *ukkin kabbina*, special steel from the neighbouring region of Tamilakam, and turn them into swords, arrow and spearheads. As Panditaru is aware, this

steel is highly prized for its sharpness, flexibility, and durability. Arab traders from the far off deserts buy this steel and then make special weapons that are called Damascus steel.”

“What about the Chandalas?”

The *sarpanch* spat on the ground in disgust. “Oh, they are filthy, distorted creatures who cremate dead bodies and eat them. You do not want to meet them. They are impure.”

Bala though for a moment and said, “Expert archers and distorted corpse eating tribes. Very interesting.”

He turned to the *sarpanch* and said, “Be here after two sunrises, we will depart for the hills. Send a message to the Chenchus. Tell them that we come in peace with an offer for trade.”

After the *sarpanch* had gone, Bhimappa spoke in anger.

“Trade? Those Chenchus want to kill us and you want trade? I can send a messenger to Kampana Sthana and ask for soldiers. We can finish these evil people once for all.”

“Tact, Bhimappa. The tongue wins more wealth, land and friends than the sword. Besides, our Sāmrajya needs good steel for weapons and for agriculture.”

Bhimappa had developed a grudging respect for Bala. He said to himself, “Yes, this *pandit* is a clever one. Too bad he does not wield a sword.”

The Poison Girl

Bala sat late in the night writing reports for Dhanyaru on the parchments. They would be sent early tomorrow by a messenger. The full moon filled the night with calm beauty.

He heard the faint sounds of anklets outside his tent. “Must be the oxen with bells around their necks.”

The sounds repeated and a soft female voice started singing, crooning lyrics that praised his intelligence. The voice whispered to him to come out and enjoy in the arms of the singer.

Bala slowly peered through the curtains and saw a female form standing in the shadows, beckoning him to come out. He prodded at the sleeping Bhimappa to get up quietly, pick up his sword and bow and come behind him stealthily. The he stepped out. The camp area was lit by the campfires and torches placed near the perimeter.

Bala was intrigued. How had this female managed to enter the camp when soldiers guarded the perimeter?

He looked up at the branches and guessed that she had come from the trees. Either the female was audacious or very desperate.

He recalled to the ancient *Kalki Purana*, an ancient Indian text that spoke of legendary Viṣakanyā, poison girls and female assassins who were brought up on a diet of poison and antidote so that their body fluids were poisonous. Any sexual contact, a kiss, bite or even a

scratch with such female would kill a man. They were experts in handling arms, climbing, and toyed with a man before giving him an agonising death. Some were exceptionally skilled in dancing and singing.

She led him to the edge of the clearing and quickly clambered over through the branches. The she gestured at him to cross the clearing and come under the tree. Bala followed and motioned at the startled guards to remain silent. Bhimappa followed hiding in the shadows and waved at a couple of soldiers to come behind.

She stood under a tree, untied her bodice and her saree and he could see her breasts, tight and bobbing, and the taut thighs. Then she held out his arms. A lesser mortal would have jumped into the arms of this siren.

Bala looked into the thick branches and could make out dim figures.

Raising his arms and pointing at the branches, he shouted, “Nayaka, fire the arrows.”

A flurry of arrows flew through the branches, drawing a mortal cry as two people fell down. Angered, the girl drew out her dagger that she had hidden in a scabbard behind her back and turned on Bala and the soldiers.

“Ah, Viṣakanyā. Throw down your weapon and surrender or die.

Facing certain death, the girl threw her knife and bent down to put on her clothes.

“Do not kill her. Use your spears and corner her. Carefully tie her. Do not let her even scratch or spit at you.”

A bamboo pole was placed between her arms, her legs were tied, and she was brought into the camp. She was then tied to a stake where the horses and oxen were tethered. She spat, hissed and screamed, reminding Bala of a captured leopard.

He warned the soldiers. “Stay away from her even if she invites you. She is like a cobra, her blood, spit, skin, everything is poisoned.

Yes, she was beautiful. One of the fairest girls they had seen. Her skin shone like cream, the tightly bound breasts heaved, the nipples standing out straight, her thighs were trim and taut with muscles of an athlete. They threw a blanket over her to cover her modesty.

Bala and the soldiers sat around her, he asked, “What is your name? Who sent you? Who is behind this conspiracy?”

“May you rot in hell! I will tell you nothing.”

“See, Kanya, we are asking you politely, we can get cruel if you want.”

“Hah. The soldiers of Maharaja Krishna Devraya would never torture or harm a woman.”

“That’s true. You have killed some men from this and other villages. Their grieving widows will not be kind. They will burn your beautiful face, cut off your nose, ears, and breasts. After they are through, not even a Chandala will take you. What will you do then?”

She went silent for some minutes, then looked up and said, “I will talk.”

She began, “My name is Aruna. I am from the *Pataliputra gharana* of assassins, very far from here. My *upadhyayani*, female teacher, told me that I was kidnapped when I was a child and raised up as a Viṣakanyā in Vijayapura. We do not owe allegiance to anyone. My teacher taught me the arts of seduction and killing. She sent me on missions to kill villagers in this area. Some male assassins accompany me and while I seduce and poison important people, they do the bloody work and dismember the bodies.”

“Who gave the mission to your teacher?”

“We are not told that. Believe me. I did see some diamond and gold merchants and generals of the Bahmani Sultanate in our *akhada* (school).”

“Why did you kill the temple guard some moons back?”

“Oh, that fellow? I was ordered to strike fear here. The temple is an important place and a death here has more impact than in any other place. My teacher was given orders that the whole area extending to fifty *yodjana* must be cleared.”

“Why did you attempt to kill me now?”

“The horrible death of a *pandit* would scare people away and they would abandon this place.”

“What about the poisoned kheer?”

“That was the plan of Ganesha. Your soldiers killed him when he hid in the tree.”

“What do you know of this demon Kabandha?”

“Nothing. I have never crossed paths with this creature. I once camped in a forest with the other assassins and saw this creature watching me as I took a bath. It was fearsome.”

“Can you tell me more about this creature?”

“I swear on the name of my *upadhyayani* that I do not know. You should go to the hills beyond Vatapi, to the settlements of the Chandalas and the Chenchus. What you seek lies there.”

The *nayaka* was losing patience with the assassin. He wanted to send her to Kampana Sthana and let Dhanyaru decide about her fate. He was very angry and loathed her.

Bala pulled him aside and said, “She was kidnapped as a baby and had taken to this assassin profession involuntarily. She is obeying her teacher and the code of the assassins. She is a soldier who has sworn allegiance to her leader, something that all soldiers do. She killed

enemies and is ready to die for her leader, as you soldiers do. Logically and ethically, there was nothing wrong in her actions. She is more useful to us here than at Kampana Sthana.”

His attitude towards the assassin changed, Bhimappa admired her for the dedication and courage. She had not shed tears, not shown any fear, or cried for mercy. He looked with renewed respect at Bala. “Yes, Panditaru, you are right.”

Aruna broke out, “Please kill me and burn my body. I cannot go back since I am caught. They will turn me into a servant to live the life of a menial. It hurts my pride. Please light a fire so that I can immolate myself.”

Bala said “See, Viskanya. The past is over. What happened was beyond your control. I invite you to join our army. We will respect and honour you. While we have strong and brave soldiers, you have mastered stealth. Maybe you can raise a force of female assassins.”

Seeing a new hope and a future, she sat quiet and then spoke. “Panditaru. Let me accompany you to Vatapi and beyond. A woman can accomplish more than a hundred soldiers. Please let me do something good and remove my bad karma.”

“As you wish.”

The soldiers untied her and gave her a tent to sleep. They expected she would be gone in the night. But early morning, she was bathed, borrowed the armour of a soldier and stood beside a horse, all ready to go. The loose fitting armour and helmet hid her form and only a close look would show that she was a woman.

To the Temple of Banashankari Mata

They left after two days and approached Vatapi, travelling on the rough road that wound through the forest. Bala and the soldiers dismounted at the Banashankari Mata (mother) temple. The temple built in the 7th century was dedicated to Banashankari, or Shakambari, goddess of the forest, an incarnation of goddess Parvati, the consort of Lord Shiva. Goddess Shakambari killed the demon Durgamasura, and the idol showed her with spears, swords, and other weapons held in her eight arms. Devotees were required to take a dip in the adjacent pond, go barefoot, without any armour, weapons or leather items and then take the blessings of the Devi.

Aruna waited outside the temple complex with the horses. Removing the armour would mean revealing her identity. She bent down, prostrating in front of the temple gate, and prayed.

“Oh, *devi* Banashankari, Shakambari *mata*, I beg you, Parvati *mata*. I have no family and I do not ask for wealth. I pray that you give me a soldier’s death. Let me die fighting and with honour under your gaze.”

Journey to the Chalachagudda

They dismounted at the foot of Chalachagudda hills of Vatapi. It would not be possible to take the horses over. A local soldier was given charge of the horses, to feed, and water them. Then they started climbing.

The path, if it can be called one, was narrow, twisted, shadowed by overhead rocks, and a slip would mean plunging into a rock-filled ravine. They entered a small cave that opened to a somewhat straight and narrow ledge, free from over cropping rocks.

They stepped on the ledge and suddenly rocks started raining down on them. Bhimappa and his soldiers were halfway across the ledge and they were trapped. One wrong move and they would plunge to their deaths, if they stayed, they would be smashed by the boulders. Bala and Aruna stood at the entrance to the path, safe but they could not do anything.

They looked above and saw figures shouting and throwing down rocks. Aruna leapt forward on the path with her bow drawn. It would be difficult to shoot up but she quickly let off a few arrows and watched with satisfaction as they found their mark.

It was a good hundred *dhanush* and she shot with great precision, forcing the fellows back. Bhimappa and his soldiers rushed back to safety.

“I guess I know who shot the arrow that night in the temple,” remarked Bala.

Aruna did not answer and pretended to be busy examining her bow.

They withdrew to the cave where they were safe, but what next?

Bala said, “We can return the way we came, without accomplishing anything. The conspiracy will fester and come out in another way. The killings and story of Kabandha would remain unsolved and if we go forward death is certain.”

He turned towards the *sarpanch*. “You sent word to your contact here and we were expecting a welcome, but not this way.”

“Yes, *panditaru*. I know the Chenchu Shiva, the chieftain, well. He was to meet us at the base. But he did not turn up.”

There was a sound of slithering and falling rocks from a dark corner of the cave. The soldiers sprang up, swords ready.

A figure sprang out, crying, “Peace, my friend *sarpanch*. It is I, Shiva.”

He came forward with two tribal soldiers. The *sarpanch* was very angry. “Shiva, you had told us that you would help and we trusted you. We almost died on the ledge outside.”

He began. “Let me explain, my friend. My rival Rudra took the help of a general of the Bahmani Sultanate and threw me out of my village and he now rules my people. The people who attacked you are Rudra’s soldiers and those of the Bahmani’s.”

He turned towards Bala and Bhimappa and bowed. “Help me get my throne back, O *panditaru* and Nayakaru. You will have me allegiance.”

Bala sat quietly as Shiva spoke of Rudra’s treachery.

Then he said, “O Mukhyastha, chieftain. Bahamani Kingdom lies in Vijayapura, many *yodjanas* from here. Why did they come so far and support Rudra? What do you have that they want so badly that they are willing to risk a war with the mighty Vijayanagar Sāmrājya? How did they arrive here without our spies noticing them?”

“Panditaru, they came disguised as traders and paid hefty tax and bribes to the border guards and so they were allowed in. Gradually, the number increased and there are about a thousand of them in various locations in the hill. I opposed their presence, but the greedy Rudra was bought by gifts and women and they threw me out one night. They wanted to kill me but I managed to escape.”

“Why did you not send a messenger to the Nayaka?”

“O Panditaru, you have a policy of not interfering in the internal matters of tribes. Besides, the Bahamani were trading and paying tax. Who would have listened to me?”

“Mukhyastha, what is it that the Bahamani seek?”

“That I do not know. I know that they dig in the hills and hunt for rocks. Wait, I managed to get hold of two rocks that I stole from a trader. Here they are.”

The rocks were dull, very rough and looked like hard glass or *Maikā*, with one a pale white and the other had a dirty red tinge, and about the size of child’s fist. Bala rubbed it against the rocky wall of the cave and saw that it made deep scratches. Aruna, who had been silent all this time, gasped, and Bala motioned her to keep quiet.

“The rocks are indeed worthless. These Bahamanis are fools. Can I keep them?” he asked.

“Sure, *panditaru*.”

“*Dhan ’yavādagaḷu*, thanks.”

“What do you know of Kabandha?”

“Oh that! Come I will show his kin.”

Meeting the Kabandha

They started crawling through the labyrinth of caves. Bala asked one soldier to keep watch at the cave mouth. He hurriedly scrawled a message on a parchment, enclosed one of the rocks in a cloth piece, and asked a runner to immediately rush to Kampana Sthana on the fastest horse. The parchment was to be sent by carrier pigeon from the nearest outpost.

Bhimappa could not contain his curiosity and he asked Bala when they were at a distance from the rest.

“Panditaru, what was that stone? Why did you send a soldier with it to Kampana Sthana?”

“Oh that, nothing important. I want to keep it as a decorative piece in my room.”

Scowling and his mouth pouting he said “This is not good, *panditaru*. You do not trust me? I reveal all my secrets to you.”

“Nayaka, I trust your loyalty with my life, but I do not know if you will keep your mouth shut.”

His shoulders stiffening in anger, Bhimappa prepared to walk off in anger.

“O Nayaka, come here.” Making sure that they were unobserved, Bala pulled out the remaining stone and gave it to Bhimappa.

“That is a *Vajra* (diamond). What you hold is worth more than the wages you, I and your soldiers will earn in our lifetime. Aruna recognised them.”

Unable to contain his excitement, he was about to shout out when Bala placed his hand on Bhimappa’s mouth and took back the stone.

“Now we know why the Bahamani soldiers are here. There appears to be a massive vein of diamonds. We have find out the story of Kabandha.”

“Why did you tell the chieftain that the stones are worthless?”

“*Jñāna* knowledge is power. Now, why should I enlighten the fellow about the fortune on which he sits, and increase his bargaining power? He is now beseeching us to regain his throne and this balance should not be disturbed.”

“Oh, Panditaru, you are very cunning. No wonder Dhanyaru trusts you.”

The caves were very old with carvings of Lord Buddha. Though he wanted to look at the carvings, there was no time.

The path through the caves ended and they came to a forest with a small clearing. The stench of rotting corpses was overpowering.

Shiva called out in a small voice and they could hear a rustle in the trees. They could make out that something was staring at them. He called out again in a coaxing tone and threw a piece of meat from his bag.

The thing waddled into view and the group stared, shocked, at the creature. It had short stunted legs, the head had disappeared into the shoulder blades and the mouth emerged from the chest, it stank of putrefying flesh. One eye stared balefully at them. It was a horrible sight and they watched in horror.

“Panditaru, this is a kin of Kabandha. It is a chandala. Decades of incest and mating within the tribe has turned them into this form. It is harmless and lives off rotting corpses and dead animals. We use these creatures to frighten people. We paint an eye and mouth on its belly. The Bahamani carry it around, kill villagers and then place it in the spot, scaring them into believing the story. “

Panditaru slapped his forehead with his palm. “What a sad story, and the people were scared of this freak.”

Ambush and the Death of the Viṣakanyā

Suddenly arrows and spears started falling around then taking down two soldiers. They heard shouts as a horde of Rudra’s and the Bahamani soldiers attacked. It seems that the enemy soldiers were tracking their movements and waiting to get them in a clearing.

Bhimappa shouted orders and the soldiers arranged themselves in a tight circle, their shields protecting them from the missiles. They were heavily outnumbered and knew that they were doomed to die here and be eaten by the Chandalas.

Bhimappa shouted at the soldiers that they had to make it to the cave mouth where only one person could walk at a time. Then he led a charge at the soldiers massed in front of the cave mouth.

He parried, thrust, swung his sword with practised ease and strength, not caring for the wounds the enemy inflicted on him. The soldiers showed the same dexterity and courage as they carved a way out of the massed bodies. The cave entrance was just a few spans away, but it would be impossible to reach it.

Bala picked up a sword and fought. Bhimappa glanced in admiration as Bala parried and thrust his sword into a Bahamani soldier.

Not seeing Aruna he looked back to see that she had climbed a tree and was lifting her bow. Then she started shooting at the mass in front of the cave entrance. A score of soldiers soon lay dead and the remaining scurried to find shelter.

She shouted over the battle din, “Go *panditaru*, run. I will hold them off.”

Bala and the soldiers rushed to the entrance and halted to see her as she shot the last arrow. They wanted to rescue her but that was not possible. The Bahamani soldiers were getting ready to shoot her down when she removed her armour and her breast cloth. The soldiers looked in startled lust at the semi-naked figure that mocked them.

Pulling out her sword, she jumped down among them thrusting and swinging the blade with deadly ferocity of the battle hungry possessed. She was like the Goddess Shakambari and fought even as the soldiers kept stabbing her. When she could not use the sword, she drew her knife and stabbed the soldiers. It was like watching a trapped leopard fighting. She fought until a soldier thrust a spear from behind. She reached back, broke the spear and fell on them. When she could not use her knife, she attacked them biting and scratching knowing that her poison would kill. She died fighting till the last bite.

Tears fell from the eyes of the battle hardened Bhimappa Narasu Nayaka as he watched the brave assassin fight to the death.

He got down on his knees raised his hands in a *namaskar* and said, “O *mahan mahilā yōdha*, great female warrior, I salute your brave death. No soldier of our emperor has fought like you did.”

Escape From the Hills

They scurried through the cave expecting an ambush at every turn. However, the Bahamani soldiers had not cut off their retreat. They rushed down the hill to the waiting horses and galloped on to Kampana Sthana.

After they were some distance away, they halted and rested the tired horses. They were safe for now.

Bhimappa tended to the soldiers wounds, patting their backs and comforting them. He came to Bala who was sitting with his back against a tree.

“O Panditaru. What do we do now?”

“I had sent a messenger to Kampana Sthana by carrier pigeon. A strong contingent of soldiers will be here shortly. We will attack the Bahamani soldiers and show them the wrath of our empire.”

“Yes, *panditaru*. Too bad about the assassin. But by all gods, I never seen anyone fight and die so valiantly.”

“Yes. We will build a shrine for her and honour her memory. We have solved the mystery of the demon, found out about the conspiracy, and unearthed a great treasure of diamonds that will make our empire rich. All our objectives are achieved.

He added, “Rest now, *nayaka*, tomorrow is another fight.”

THE END

Based in Pune, India, Shashi Kadapa is the managing editor of ActiveMuse (www.activemuse.org), a journal of literature. His short stories appeared in print anthologies of Casagrande Press, Alien Dimensions #11, Agorist Writers, Escaped Ink, War Monkey, Verses of Silence, and in online publications of Spadina Literary Review, Nymphs Publications, and others. He has written for The Times of India and Debonair. Shashi is working on a book of short stories and a novel. Link to his works:

<https://authorcentral.amazon.com/gp/books>

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AL GORE HAS LEFT THE BUILDING by Carlton Herzog

It doesn't take an Adam Smith to know that we're mortgaging our kids' future by our excesses in the present. The hope of every parent is that their children and their children's children will inherit a better world. They cannot imagine, despite the growing body of evidence, that the future has already been bought and sold. Not by a rival nation or group of terrorists, but by the global polluters and gun manufacturers who purvey and sustain a culture of selfishness and immediate gratification.

Until recently, I marched in that sad parade of the blind and greedy. It was only by a curious twist of fate that I learned the truth. It was an abnormally warm day in January. The trees were already getting back their leaves and the birds had returned from a brief winter hiatus.

I was heading out the door for work when I heard, "Hey there, cowboy. Wanna buy somethin'?"

It's not every day you hear a folksy Tennessee twang in Duluth Minnesota. Nor see a rickety pick-up emblazoned with *Junky's Junkorama* on its side. But those were the sights and sounds that greeted me that morning as I left for work.

The driver sported a red white and blue top hat and matching suspenders. With his freckled face and tooth gap large enough for a fat cigar, he looked like a fusion of Uncle Sam and Howdy Doody.

I'll never forget that Hee-Haw voice asking, "Say, pardner, see anything ya likes?"

I gave that rolling garage sale a quick once-over and spotted three weird lamps tied to its side. I had just broken a house-lamp the day before, and quick, cheap replacement would do until I got to the store.

He saw where my eyes had settled and said, "Why, them's special lamps. Nuthin' like 'em in all the world. This one here will show you the past as it actually happened; this one here will show what's waitin' on your offspring down the road; and this one will give you a glimpse of your afterlife."

I played along with his little joke and said, "I want to know what the future holds for my kids and their kids. I want to see them enjoying a future full of flying cars, personal jet-packs, and rocket vacations to Mars."

Junkie said, "Then recite this ditty before you travel:

*O magic lamp
Of time and space
Take me to that future place
To see what awaits my children three
And what their children's children's lives shall be.*

So, I paid him, stuck it in my car, and drove to work. After work, I turned it on. Then for kicks I said the magic words.

A moment later I was standing outside a row of concrete blockhouses. The sky above was brown and murky, the air smelled of burnt rubber and sulphur. I stood there dumbfounded as hooded figures shuffled by me. Each one was numbered, scarlet integers instead of letters.

I wanted to know where and when I was, so I stopped number 24 and asked, “What is this place?”

She looked at me with furtive eyes embedded in a carcinoma-infected and cratered face. She said, “New Duluth.”

I said, “New Duluth? The place has really gone downhill.”

She said, “Not from around here, I take it. That’s weird. Everybody knows that Duluth is a hot mess. Food’s in short supply, drinkable water too, because of the droughts. Other parts of the world where it’s really crowded, people are eating each other. Gotten so bad they auction off folks as food.”

I asked, “What’s wrong with your face?”

She said, “Don’t you know about white leprosy? *Mucocutaneous leishmaniasis*. It’s caused by the bite of an infected sand fly. As the global temperature rose, the sand flies migrated north from Honduras. They carry a parasite that infects the mucous membranes and eats away the nose and lips. That’s why we all have giant weeping sores where our faces used to be. And they brought an entourage with them—chiggers, ticks, kissing bugs (because they like to bite your face) scorpions and bullet ants.”

I said, “So all those warnings about melting ice sheets and rising temperatures... What about Al Gore and his *An Inconvenient Truth*?”

“Ignored! Sure, some folks stopped buying gas guzzlers, some quit eating methane belching factory farmed animals. But most just didn’t give a shit. Sports teams and Facebook and Twitter were the priorities. Maybe if those jackasses had rooted for the earth as much as they rooted for their overpaid athletes, things might have turned out different.”

“So, sports fans, thanks to you, we wake up to muddy skies that hang over us like a dead man on the gallows. The ozone layer is dead. The UV radiation rains down unchecked. It’s scattered and magnified by the smog. Good farmland and clean water are scarce. There are more people than food to go around, Minnesota is a rainforest, and the former East and West Coasts are both under water. Disease and body burning pits are everywhere.”

“What was the engine that drove the planet off the cliff?”

“Our ancestors pursued a policy of unrestrained consumption. It was all about building, manufacturing and owning shit. In the process, they dumped crap in the air, overfished the ocean, cut down the forests, heated up the planet and generally treated the earth like it was their personal outhouse. Whenever our so-called leaders were called on their bullshit, they claimed the facts were fake news, even as one ice shelf after another slid into the ocean. They didn’t care that the weather was going crazy with heat waves and super-hurricanes. So, I ask you: homo sapiens? I think not. More like homo dumbass.”

“But this fresh hell gets fresher still. If you want to see the Statute of Liberty, then get in a boat and row until you see the Great Plastic Reef. If you look hard enough among the bobbing bottles and plastic wrapped seabirds, you can just see the torch poking through the brown water. If you are truly dedicated to seeing that icon of democracy in all her tainted glory, then take one of the submarine tours of New York and count the barnacles on Lady Liberty. You’ll find she is as sunken in the muck as her once proud ideals.

“See, when food and water are in short supply. People get restless. When people get restless and disaffected with government, government steps on them. So, if the Statute of Liberty were refloated today, she would need a complete makeover to be relevant. Myself, I would replace her torch with a baseball bat wrapped in barbed-wire, her sandals with jack-boots, her crown with a riot helmet, her tablet with *Authoritarianism for Dummies*, and all that yearning to breathe free stuff with a hankering to be ground underfoot.”

Then she looked at me funny, and asked, “Why aren’t you covered up? And why aren’t you disfigured? Hold on! I’ve seen you in a picture. You’re my great, great, great grandfather.”

I said, “I used a time travelling lamp to get here.” Then I showed her the lamp.

She said, “If you can go back, then maybe you can change all this.”

I said, “In my time people don’t listen to reputable scientists now. Like you said, they pretend the facts aren’t the facts, so what makes you think they’ll listen to me. Besides, even if everything in my past world changes that doesn’t mean everything here will.”

She said, “Granted, but you can try. That’s the least you can do. If not for me, but for your kids and theirs, because this ugliness, this nightmare, didn’t happen overnight. The world’s been a miserable place to live for some time, and like it or not, you, personally, will get a taste of it.”

I said, “I’ll do what I can, but if they stick me in a straitjacket and lock me in a rubber room, then game over.”

She said, “Hold on. You’re right. It may or may not be possible to change the past to change the future, but you can still help right here and now. Everybody’s DNA is fried. Most of the kids born today are monsters: flippers for arms and legs, multiple heads, dwarves or outright mental defectives. An infusion of your DNA into the gene pool could make a real difference. It could salvage humanity, give it some breathing room.”

I waffled: “I’m not sure I want to stick around here.”

She grabbed the lamp away from me: “You’re staying and you’re helping to fix this. Don’t make me scream for the Blackjacks. They will knock the snot out of you for no other reason than you are a foreigner.”

That last statement spooked me. Now there was the prospect of being beaten to death by thugs with badges. I instinctively grabbed at the lamp, but she started to run. As she did, it dawned on me, she intended to use it to go backwards in time. Or try to sell it. But she could click that switch until the cows came home. Without the incantation, she wasn’t going anywhere.

I followed her in and out of the passages between the blockhouses. Then I lost her. I wandered about what must have been a community housing project. I came to a large open pit where I could see the charred remains of burnt bodies.

It struck me that humanity had let itself be bought and sold, not by some sinister supernatural force, but by its own hand. I wondered if there something in us, some imp of the perverse, that guaranteed sooner or later we would be the instrument of our own undoing. A kind of invincible stupidity baked into our DNA.

But I had larger matters to consider. Where had my ancestor slid off to with my only means of escape from this hell on earth? Surely, the pigeon has gone somewhere safe to roost. I needed to figure out where that might be.

As I hid in the shadows, a small hooded figure happened by. I didn't have time for a discussion. I needed answers and I needed them fast. What I thought was a child should with the right coercion point me in the right direction of number 24.

I grabbed its arm. It was far stronger than I anticipated as I dragged it into the alley for a makeshift interrogation.

“What gives, man?”

The voice was not that of a child but of a man. Sure enough, when I pulled back its hood, I was staring into the face of a disfigured dwarf.

“Tell me what I need to know, dwarf, and you're free to go.”

“You've got the wrong kind of dwarf. I'm a birth defect, not a natural. So, I'm short in the wisdom department as well.”

“Where can I find number 24?”

“Why you want her and why you dressed so different?”

“Never mind that. Spill the beans or I wrench your arm out of its socket.”

“Fair enough. She lives in the number 24 hotel. She's on the A level 'cause she's an A. Anything else?”

“No. Sorry to rough you up.”

“I've had worse at the hands of the Blackjacks. They catch an anomaly such as yourself and they'll skin you alive.”

I left the dwarf and went on safari for blockhouse 24. In short order I found it. Unfortunately, there was security outside. I asked myself why that would be. I considered that it had to do with protecting the means of procreation. But the longer I stood there and observed I realized it was some sort of state sponsored brothel reserved for the Blackjacks. They were constantly going in and out arm in arm with hooded women.

I got lucky. Number 24—I had no clue as to her real name—came strolling out, lamp in hand. I figured that she couldn't get it to work and was on her way to find somebody who could. I followed her through the streets, close but out of sight. I caught a few glances from passers-by, but they were too preoccupied with their own nightmare to enter mine.

She finally arrived at a shop. It called itself The Shop of the Long Now. The name seemed apropos in this city of the damned. I watched through the window as they bartered. He tried to get it to work without success. Finally, he stepped into the back and came back with a large musty, moth-eaten tome. Although I couldn't see the title, I assumed it was a book of magic. Perhaps it explained the lamp's magic.

I couldn't risk letting those two decipher the lamp's mystical code. I ran into the shop, shoved 24 to the ground, punched the shopkeeper in the nose, grabbed the lamp and ran like hell. I found a secluded bit of real estate far from the disfigured crowd and turned on the lamp. I said the magic words:

*O magic lamp of time and place
Return me to my rightful place.*

The next moment I was back in my living room. My wife and kids just stared at me. All I could say was "I'll explain later" and headed for the garage.

I sat down and did some deep soul-searching. Nobody would believe my story of that I could be sure. Even if someone signed on and corroborated it, I doubted whether the narrative would get much traction.

The human mind is geared toward the immediate, the up close and the personal, so if it ain't happening to me then it ain't happening. Given our limited cognitive architecture, the future is an alien planet.

Animals are lucky. They don't have to think about their own death or that of their species. They do their earthly business for a time then quietly say goodbye. Now I understand the import of the proverb that if ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to be wise. Al Gore has left the building, but if I don't think on it, everything will be just fine.

THE END

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TWO DOCTORS by MR James

It is a very common thing, in my experience, to find papers shut up in old books; but one of the rarest things to come across any such that are at all interesting. Still it does happen, and one should never destroy them unlooked at. Now it was a practice of mine before the war occasionally to buy old ledgers of which the paper was good, and which possessed a good many blank leaves, and to extract these and use them for my own notes and writings. One such I purchased for a small sum in 1911. It was tightly clasped, and its boards were warped by having for years been obliged to embrace a number of extraneous sheets. Three-quarters of this inserted matter had lost all vestige of importance for any living human being: one bundle had not. That it belonged to a lawyer is certain, for it is endorsed: The strangest case I have yet met, and bears initials, and an address in Gray's Inn. It is only materials for a case, and consists of statements by possible witnesses. The man who would have been the defendant or prisoner seems never to have appeared. The dossier is not complete, but, such as it is, it furnishes a riddle in which the supernatural appears to play a part. You must see what you can make of it.

The following is the setting and the tale as I elicit it.

Dr. Abell was walking in his garden one afternoon waiting for his horse to be brought round that he might set out on his visits for the day. As the place was Islington, the month June, and the year 1718, we conceive the surroundings as being countrified and pleasant. To him entered his confidential servant, Luke Jennett, who had been with him twenty years.

‘I said I wished to speak to him, and what I had to say might take some quarter of an hour. He accordingly bade me go into his study, which was a room opening on the terrace path where he was walking, and came in himself and sat down. I told him that, much against my will, I must look out for another place. He inquired what was my reason, in consideration I had been so long with him. I said if he would excuse me he would do me a great kindness, because (this appears to have been common form even in 1718) I was one that always liked to have everything pleasant about me. As well as I can remember, he said that was his case likewise, but he would wish to know why I should change my mind after so many years, and, says he, ‘you know there can be no talk of a remembrance of you in my will if you leave my service now.’ I said I had made my reckoning of that.

‘Then,’ says he, ‘you must have some complaint to make, and if I could I would willingly set it right.’ And at that I told him, not seeing how I could keep it back, the matter of my former affidavit and of the bedstaff in the dispensing-room, and said that a house where such things happened was no place for me. At which he, looking very black upon me, said no more, but called me fool, and said he would pay what was owing me in the morning; and so, his horse being waiting, went out. So for that night I lodged with my sister’s husband near Battle Bridge and came early next morning to my late master, who then made a great matter that I had not lain in his house and stopped a crown out of my wages owing.

‘After that I took service here and there, not for long at a time, and saw no more of him till I came to be Dr. Quinn’s man at Dodds Hall in Islington.’

There is one very obscure part in this statement, namely, the reference to the former affidavit and the matter of the bedstaff. The former affidavit is not in the bundle of papers. It is to be

feared that it was taken out to be read because of its special oddity, and not put back. Of what nature the story was may be guessed later, but as yet no clue has been put into our hands.

The Rector of Islington, Jonathan Pratt, is the next to step forward. He furnishes particulars of the standing and reputation of Dr. Abell and Dr. Quinn, both of whom lived and practised in his parish.

‘It is not to be supposed,’ he says, ‘that a physician should be a regular attendant at morning and evening prayers, or at the Wednesday lectures, but within the measure of their ability I would say that both these persons fulfilled their obligations as loyal members of the Church of England. At the same time (as you desire my private mind) I must say, in the language of the schools, *distinguo*. Dr. A. was to me a source of perplexity, Dr. Q. to my eye a plain, honest believer, not inquiring over closely into points of belief, but squaring his practice to what lights he had. The other interested himself in questions to which Providence, as I hold, designs no answer to be given us in this state: he would ask me, for example, what place I believed those beings now to hold in the scheme of creation which by some are thought neither to have stood fast when the rebel angels fell, nor to have joined with them to the full pitch of their transgression.

‘As was suitable, my first answer to him was a question, What warrant he had for supposing any such beings to exist? for that there was none in Scripture I took it he was aware. It appeared—for as I am on the subject, the whole tale may be given—that he grounded himself on such passages as that of the satyr which Jerome tells us conversed with Antony; but thought too that some parts of Scripture might be cited in support. ‘And besides,’ said he, ‘you know ‘tis the universal belief among those that spend their days and nights abroad, and I would add that if your calling took you so continuously as it does me about the country lanes by night, you might not be so surprised as I see you to be by my suggestion.’ ‘You are then of John Milton’s mind,’ I said, ‘and hold that

Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth Unseen, both when we wake and when we sleep.’

‘I do not know,’ he said, ‘why Milton should take upon himself to say ‘unseen’; though to be sure he was blind when he wrote that. But for the rest, why, yes, I think he was in the right.’ ‘Well,’ I said, ‘though not so often as you, I am not seldom called abroad pretty late; but I have no mind of meeting a satyr in our Islington lanes in all the years I have been here; and if you have had the better luck, I am sure the Royal Society would be glad to know of it.’

‘I am reminded of these trifling expressions because Dr. A. took them so ill, stamping out of the room in a huff with some such word as that these high and dry parsons had no eyes but for a prayerbook or a pint of wine.

‘But this was not the only time that our conversation took a remarkable turn. There was an evening when he came in, at first seeming gay and in good spirits, but afterwards as he sat and smoked by the fire falling into a musing way; out of which to rouse him I said pleasantly that I supposed he had had no meetings of late with his odd friends. A question which did effectually arouse him, for he looked most wildly, and as if scared, upon me, and said, ‘You were never there? I did not see you. Who brought you?’ And then in a more collected tone, ‘What was this about a meeting? I believe I must have been in a doze.’ To which I answered

that I was thinking of fauns and centaurs in the dark lane, and not of a witches' Sabbath; but it seemed he took it differently.

“Well,” said he, “I can plead guilty to neither; but I find you very much more of a sceptic than becomes your cloth. If you care to know about the dark lane you might do worse than ask my housekeeper that lived at the other end of it when she was a child.” “Yes,” said I, “and the old women in the almshouse and the children in the kennel. If I were you, I would send to your brother Quinn for a bolus to clear your brain.” “Damn Quinn,” says he; “talk no more of him: he has embezzled four of my best patients this month; I believe it is that cursed man of his, Jennett, that used to be with me, his tongue is never still; it should be nailed to the pillory if he had his deserts.” This, I may say, was the only time of his showing me that he had any grudge against either Dr. Quinn or Jennett, and as was my business, I did my best to persuade him he was mistaken in them. Yet it could not be denied that some respectable families in the parish had given him the cold shoulder, and for no reason that they were willing to allege. The end was that he said he had not done so ill at Islington but that he could afford to live at ease elsewhere when he chose, and anyhow he bore Dr. Quinn no malice. I think I now remember what observation of mine drew him into the train of thought which he next pursued. It was, I believe, my mentioning some juggling tricks which my brother in the East Indies had seen at the court of the Rajah of Mysore. “A convenient thing enough,” said Dr. Abell to me, “if by some arrangement a man could get the power of communicating motion and energy to inanimate objects.” “As if the axe should move itself against him that lifts it; something of that kind?” “Well, I don’t know that that was in my mind so much; but if you could summon such a volume from your shelf or even order it to open at the right page.”

“He was sitting by the fire—it was a cold evening—and stretched out his hand that way, and just then the fire-irons, or at least the poker, fell over towards him with a great clatter, and I did not hear what else he said. But I told him that I could not easily conceive of an arrangement, as he called it, of such a kind that would not include as one of its conditions a heavier payment than any Christian would care to make; to which he assented. “But,” he said, “I have no doubt these bargains can be made very tempting, very persuasive. Still, you would not favour them, eh, Doctor? No, I suppose not.”

“This is as much as I know of Dr. Abell’s mind, and the feeling between these men. Dr. Quinn, as I said, was a plain, honest creature, and a man to whom I would have gone—indeed I have before now gone to him for advice on matters of business. He was, however, every now and again, and particularly of late, not exempt from troublesome fancies. There was certainly a time when he was so much harassed by his dreams that he could not keep them to himself, but would tell them to his acquaintances and among them to me. I was at supper at his house, and he was not inclined to let me leave him at my usual time. “If you go,” he said, “there will be nothing for it but I must go to bed and dream of the chrysalis.” “You might be worse off,” said I. “I do not think it,” he said, and he shook himself like a man who is displeased with the complexion of his thoughts. “I only meant,” said I, “that a chrysalis is an innocent thing.” “This one is not,” he said, “and I do not care to think of it.”

“However, sooner than lose my company he was fain to tell me (for I pressed him) that this was a dream which had come to him several times of late, and even more than once in a night. It was to this effect, that he seemed to himself to wake under an extreme compulsion to rise and go out of doors. So he would dress himself and go down to his garden door. By the door there stood a spade which he must take, and go out into the garden, and at a particular place in the shrubbery somewhat clear and upon which the moon shone, for there was always

in his dream a full moon, he would feel himself forced to dig. And after some time the spade would uncover something light-coloured, which he would perceive to be a stuff, linen or woollen, and this he must clear with his hands. It was always the same: of the size of a man and shaped like the chrysalis of a moth, with the folds showing a promise of an opening at one end.

‘He could not describe how gladly he would have left all at this stage and run to the house, but he must not escape so easily. So with many groans, and knowing only too well what to expect, he parted these folds of stuff, or, as it sometimes seemed to be, membrane, and disclosed a head covered with a smooth pink skin, which breaking as the creature stirred, showed him his own face in a state of death. The telling of this so much disturbed him that I was forced out of mere compassion to sit with him the greater part of the night and talk with him upon indifferent subjects. He said that upon every recurrence of this dream he woke and found himself, as it were, fighting for his breath.’

Another extract from Luke Jennett’s long continuous statement comes in at this point.

‘I never told tales of my master, Dr. Abell, to anybody in the neighbourhood. When I was in another service I remember to have spoken to my fellow-servants about the matter of the bedstaff, but I am sure I never said either I or he were the persons concerned, and it met with so little credit that I was affronted and thought best to keep it to myself. And when I came back to Islington and found Dr. Abell still there, who I was told had left the parish, I was clear that it behoved me to use great discretion, for indeed I was afraid of the man, and it is certain I was no party to spreading any ill report of him. My master, Dr. Quinn, was a very just, honest man, and no maker of mischief. I am sure he never stirred a finger nor said a word by way of inducement to a soul to make them leave going to Dr. Abell and come to him; nay, he would hardly be persuaded to attend them that came, until he was convinced that if he did not they would send into the town for a physician rather than do as they had hitherto done.

‘I believe it may be proved that Dr. Abell came into my master’s house more than once. We had a new chambermaid out of Hertfordshire, and she asked me who was the gentleman that was looking after the master, that is Dr. Quinn, when he was out, and seemed so disappointed that he was out. She said whoever he was he knew the way of the house well, running at once into the study and then into the dispensing-room, and last into the bed-chamber. I made her tell me what he was like, and what she said was suitable enough to Dr. Abell; but besides she told me she saw the same man at church and someone told her that was the Doctor.

‘It was just after this that my master began to have his bad nights, and complained to me and other persons, and in particular what discomfort he suffered from his pillow and bedclothes. He said he must buy some to suit him, and should do his own marketing. And accordingly brought home a parcel which he said was of the right quality, but where he bought it we had then no knowledge, only they were marked in thread with a coronet and a bird. The women said they were of a sort not commonly met with and very fine, and my master said they were the comfortablest he ever used, and he slept now both soft and deep. Also the feather pillows were the best sorted and his head would sink into them as if they were a cloud: which I have myself remarked several times when I came to wake him of a morning, his face being almost hid by the pillow closing over it.

‘I had never any communication with Dr. Abell after I came back to Islington, but one day when he passed me in the street and asked me whether I was not looking for another service, to which I answered I was very well suited where I was, but he said I was a tickle-minded fellow and he doubted not he should soon hear I was on the world again, which indeed proved true.’

Dr. Pratt is next taken up where he left off.

‘On the 16th I was called up out of my bed soon after it was light—that is about five—with a message that Dr. Quinn was dead or dying. Making my way to his house I found there was no doubt which was the truth. All the persons in the house except the one that let me in were already in his chamber and standing about his bed, but none touching him. He was stretched in the midst of the bed, on his back, without any disorder, and indeed had the appearance of one ready laid out for burial. His hands, I think, were even crossed on his breast. The only thing not usual was that nothing was to be seen of his face, the two ends of the pillow or bolster appearing to be closed quite over it. These I immediately pulled apart, at the same time rebuking those present, and especially the man, for not at once coming to the assistance of his master. He, however, only looked at me and shook his head, having evidently no more hope than myself that there was anything but a corpse before us.

‘Indeed it was plain to any one possessed of the least experience that he was not only dead, but had died of suffocation. Nor could it be conceived that his death was accidentally caused by the mere folding of the pillow over his face. How should he not, feeling the oppression, have lifted his hands to put it away? whereas not a fold of the sheet which was closely gathered about him, as I now observed, was disordered. The next thing was to procure a physician. I had bethought me of this on leaving my house, and sent on the messenger who had come to me to Dr. Abell; but I now heard that he was away from home, and the nearest surgeon was got, who however could tell no more, at least without opening the body, than we already knew.

‘As to any person entering the room with evil purpose (which was the next point to be cleared), it was visible that the bolts of the door were burst from their stanchions, and the stanchions broken away from the door-post by main force; and there was a sufficient body of witness, the smith among them, to testify that this had been done but a few minutes before I came. The chamber being moreover at the top of the house, the window was neither easy of access nor did it show any sign of an exit made that way, either by marks upon the sill or footprints below upon soft mould.’

The surgeon’s evidence forms of course part of the report of the inquest, but since it has nothing but remarks upon the healthy state of the larger organs and the coagulation of blood in various parts of the body, it need not be reproduced. The verdict was ‘Death by the visitation of God.’

Annexed to the other papers is one which I was at first inclined to suppose had made its way among them by mistake. Upon further consideration I think I can divine a reason for its presence.

It relates to the rifling of a mausoleum in Middlesex which stood in a park (now broken up), the property of a noble family which I will not name. The outrage was not that of an ordinary resurrection man. The object, it seemed likely, was theft. The account is blunt and terrible. I

shall not quote it. A dealer in the North of London suffered heavy penalties as a receiver of stolen goods in connexion with the affair.

THE END

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INSOMNIA by Christopher T Dabrowski

English translation by Monika Olasek

Insomnia is a horrible affliction, especially when it lasts too long.
Hallucinations come with time—some of them are really terrifying.
Adrian, like the others, couldn't get any sleep.
Is this a new disease? An epidemic? Or just a trip?
Maybe he is sleeping soundly now, tossing from side to side?
Maybe what he can see is only a product of his imagination?
Or is he daydreaming, compensating for the insomnia?
Everyone is pale, practically grey. They move clumsily, jabbering.
Him too—when he saw his own reflection, he nearly cried, but the tears wouldn't come.
The worst of it all, though, are the pangs of hunger...
... the uncontrollable urge to feast on human flesh.

THE END

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SOUL MATES by Kevin O'Brien

Part Two

The tenth day...

Sunny played a short tune made up of a complicated series of notes on the whistle, then waited to see what would happen. As she understood Bǎo Mei's instructions, it was meant to act as a letter of introduction to the shantak. By the time she finished the breathing had stopped, but it wasn't long before it resumed, only more laboured, and accompanied by the sounds of something big approaching the mouth of the cave.

"Shadow," she said, "I want you to leave, right now. Get back to the camp and wait for Mayv. Tell her what's happened and what I did about it. She'll know what to do."

The cat gave her a questioning look. "Are you sure?"

She looked down at her. "There's nothing more you can do to help me, except this. The rest I have to take care of myself."

Shadow stood and trotted to the head of the trail, but then paused and looked back. "Hunt keen, fight hard, and die well, White-Lion, and may the Great Mother Bast receive you warmly to her bosom." And she disappeared down the trail.

Sunny watched her leave, but the cessation of noise except for the breathing alerted her that the shantak had reached her. She turned around, and took an involuntary step back at the sight of it.

It was as large as an elephant and as scaly as a dragon. It had two wings and legs, and a horse-shaped head at the end of a long neck that possessed jaws instead of a beak, with a long tail at the other end. And it was old; she was shocked by just how old it looked. The face was heavily wrinkled, there were patches of missing scales, the legs quivered as if too weak to support its bulk for long, and one wing drooped while the membranes of both showed tears and holes.

It stared at her with tiny watery eyes in an expression she imagined displayed both annoyance and indifference, and she realized it wanted her to speak her peace.

She bowed. "Greetings, Rabha, sibling to Quumyagga of Inganok. I am White-Lion, of Team Girl. I bring salutations from Bǎo Mei. I need your help, and he sent me to you in the hope that you would agree to my request."

It settled onto its stomach, which encouraged her to believe it had agreed to hear her out. Either that, or its legs could no longer support it. Either way, she felt she had a chance.

"My partner and mate, Braveheart, has been kidnapped by the sorceress Salamah Bargash, and taken to her tower fortress in the west."

Its eyes widened; she wondered if it knew her.

“On foot it would be a journey of many days, but I fear some calamity will befall her during the delay. However, by air we could be there in a few hours. Besides which, nightgaunts defend her tower.”

It growled deep in its throat.

“Bǎo Mei has assured me that you do not fear ‘gaunts, but I believe they would fear you, and that would allow me to gain entrance.”

It moaned and the eyes reflected what she believed to be apprehension.

“I intend to rescue her despite the risk. If I must, I will go alone, but Bǎo Mei hinted that you might be sympathetic. I would like to believe it’s because you yourself have lost a cherished mate, and you would not want to see another suffer as you have, but regardless of whether that’s true, I cannot accomplish my task alone. Although, I will still try even if you do not help me. I will never give up, until I have found and recovered her, or I have discovered that she is lost to me forever.”

The look in its eyes suggested it was considering her request, but without much pity.

She decided to risk one more gambit. “I suspect that you have little concern for us humans, and I can understand why. We have persecuted your kind, hunted it, stolen your eggs for food or treasure. But my partner and I have never done that. We are protégées of Mayv Hair-rayn, and she is a friend to your kind.”

At the mention of Medb’s name, Rabha lifted its head and uttered a throaty gurgle that sounded like that of a purring dragon. It gave her hope that her gambit might pay off.

“So, if you help me, I am willing to swear in the name of Team Girl, here and now, that neither I nor Braveheart will ever harm a shantak except in self-defence. Furthermore, I swear that should the shantaks ever be in danger, we will help defend them with our very lives. And if we break this oath, the shantaks may declare us anathema, hunt us down, and kill us.”

It just stared at her for some minutes, as if trying to gauge her honesty and sincerity. Finally it stretched out the drooping wing. She noticed that halfway along the length of the wing it possessed a hand with a thumb and three digits. It extended a clawed finger and drew a design in the dirt: three circles within an oval above an upturned crescent.

She recognized it as the seal of Nyarlathotep, to whom the shantaks owed fealty. She smiled in a grim manner and nodded her head. “Very well, I also swear in the name of the Crawling Chaos, the Soul and Messenger of the Outer Gods. May he claim me, body and soul, if I lie.”

Rabha gurgled again and Sunny imagined she saw happy compliance in its eyes. It stood up on its legs and hobbled forward until it had cleared the cave, then settled on its stomach again. It lowered the drooping wing and Sunny climbed up onto its shoulders. When she tapped it on the base of its neck, it rose up, stumbled to the edge of the ledge, and dropped off. It didn’t so much jump as fall, and it hurtled towards the accumulated scree at the bottom of the crag’s cliff-face.

“Son of a—!” But before Sunny could panic, Rabha opened its wings. The membranes caught the air, ballooned as if they were parachutes, and arrested its fall. It glided over the scree and the foothills, then it flapped its wings to gain altitude. Before long it flew high over the mountains heading due west.

Sunny wrapped her cloak more tightly around her body to shield it from the cold wind and tried to distract herself with the scenery around and below her. She was high enough that to her right she could see north past the Barrier Mountains over the Rock Desert and the Cold Waste all the way to the Spine of the World, the great range of mountains that ran east and west across the entire width of the Northlands. Amongst them, she saw the great black cone of Mt. Kadath, where Nyarlathotep and the Great Ones resided in their onyx castle at the summit. On her left she could see south clear across the Verdant Plains to the Cerenarian Sea, but while the Dreamlands did not have a horizon as such, she could not see over the ocean to the western continent of the Central Dreamlands.

She tracked their progress as they passed first the city of Selarn and then the town of Vornai, but Rabha turned sharply north at that point and penetrated deeper into the mountains. Looking down, Sunny finally realized just how accurate Bão Mei had been about how remote and inaccessible was that region of the mountains. In time they approached a bowl-shaped valley surrounded by a wall of matterhorns, and she spotted a black tower standing in its centre. It had a flat circular summit half as big as a football field, crowned with a ring of pinnacles. Sunny noted that the tower had many windows, but she couldn't see the hidden entrance Bão Mei had told her about. Nonetheless, 'gaunts flew in and out of the windows at frequent intervals. She also realized that the tower had not been constructed from masonry blocks, but appeared to have been carved from a single gargantuan mass of black volcanic rock.

Even as they crossed the rim of the valley, nightgaunts rose up from the matterhorns and the tower and converged on Rabha, but as Bão Mei predicted it showed no fear of them. It battered those that came too close with wing, leg, and tail, or chomped at them with its jaws, spitting them out after it crushed them with its teeth. The 'gaunts clustered so close that Sunny only needed to magically zap four locations in the flock to scatter them all.

Looking down, she spotted a ravine at the foot of one of the matterhorns, exactly where Bão Mei said it would be. “Land down there!” Rabha croaked and rapidly circled down in a tight spiral. It performed a controlled crash onto its stomach then hopped and flopped beneath an overhang in a ridge. Sunny slid down one wing and looked out over the floor of the valley towards the tower.

“You stay here; I’m gonna reconnoitre.” Rabha croaked and hunkered down in the back of the overhang.

She crept along one wall of the ravine, using her cloak to help camouflage her, until she reached where it opened into the valley. She quickly spotted Bão Mei's door in the base of the tower. It wasn't that far across the floor of the valley, but the way to it was open, with no cover, making her a sitting duck once the nightgaunts recovered.

Then a troop of human guards appeared, marching along the border between the valley and the matterhorns. She shrank back to stay out of sight, but she realized they were not paying close attention to their surroundings; they probably marched that way to flush out intruders in

panic. They reminded her of the Winkie guards from *The Wizard of Oz*, with their long heavy elaborate coats, their bearskin hats, and their halberds, along with their marching chant, and that gave her an idea. She crept forward again, pulling out her singlestick, and waited for the troop to pass. One guard dawdled, and when he paused to adjust his coat she jumped out of hiding and struck him in the back of the neck. He collapsed to his knees, then fell on his face. Grasping his ankles, she quickly dragged him out of sight into the ravine and stripped him of his coat and hat. She took off her own bicorn Robin Hood hat with its great golden plume and her composite bow and quiver of arrows, and covered them with her cloak. She slipped into the guard's coat, set his hat on her head, grasped her quarterstaff, and ran out to catch up with the troop. When she reached them she fell into the march step and joined in the chant. She didn't understand the words, but the tune sounded like that from the movie, so she improvised:

“Oh-Re-Oh, Yo-ah! Oh-Re-Oh, Yo-ah!”

None of the other guards looked back at her, so she kept it up.

The troop turned abruptly towards the tower, crossed the valley, and descended a ramp through a raised portcullis. The guards headed for their barracks, still marching and singing, but she spotted a wide corridor leading into the centre of the tower, and she ducked off in that direction. She paused in a shadowed alcove long enough to divest herself of the hat and coat, and made a beeline for the centre, where she expected the main staircase to be.

She encountered only one guard on the way, but he seemed to be in a hurry to get to the entrance barracks. She wished she could turn herself invisible as Medb could, but she was able to hide in a side hall, and he passed her without realizing anyone was there.

Two more guards stood watch at the doorway into the central shaft, but they stood in the threshold facing each other, so she was able to approach quite close before they spotted her. As they turned their heads, however, she pointed at them and cried, “Zap!”

Before they could yell out, they became surrounded by actinic clouds as tiny lightning bolts flowed across their bodies. They stiffened, their eyes bulging as they convulsed, and when the clouds disappeared they collapsed, unconscious, with little wisps of smoke rising from their bodies.

She skipped over them and danced into the shaft, but saw no stairs. She turned around a few times as she searched for an explanation, when she entered the centre of the shaft, and felt a force trying to lift her up. She realized then that it was a *levishaft*, enchanted to allow rapid and easy motion between floors with a minimal expenditure of personal magical energy.

She closed her eyes and willed herself to rise. In nearly the same instant, she felt herself rocketing up the shaft faster than she expected. Before she could arrest her ascent, she popped out of an opening in the tower's roof and found herself hovering high above the floor of a plaza. Looking down, she saw that the floor was covered with mystical symbols, including a magical circle. She drifted away from the hole and settled herself gently on her feet. Looking around, she found that the plaza was deserted, but before she could step back into the shaft and descend to another level, she heard flapping above and around her, and she saw a flock of nightgaunts assemble in the air then land on and cling to the pinnacles. Moments later, a tall slender woman rose out of the hole and landed on its rim. She wore a white linen *abaya*

decorated with intricate embroidered Arabic designs of rosy pink along with a bejewelled neckline, under a rosy pink silken *jilbāb*. Her head was uncovered and she wore her long dark hair loose, but a rosy pink headband encircled her brow.

“You would be Salamah Bargash.”

The lady bowed. “And you would be White-Lion. I am the Daughter of the Fuchsine Rose, Cantor Carnation, and Corundum Knight. I bid you welcome.”

Sunny smirked; sorcerers in the Dreamlands tended to be pretentious and ostentatious. “And I am the protégée of Mayv Herrain. Big whoop. I’m here because you took Braveheart from me, not to exchange accolades. I want her back, so you’d better produce her right quick, or I’ll kick your heiny from here to Ulthar.”

She flashed a cold smile. “I’m afraid I cannot do that. You see, she is insurance.”

“Insurance? For what?”

“Your cooperation.”

Sunny felt her frustration rising. “You’d better start making sense!”

“It is very simple, child. You and your partner are the Twins; you are soul mates, in a literal sense. Each of you possesses half of a single soul, such that together you form a whole.”

“Yes, yes, we know all about that; Mayv explained it to us the first night we came here.”

“Yes,” Salamah said in a tone as if humouring a slow child, “but what you do not know is that you are the key. By controlling you, I can control the power of the Twins, and I can control you by controlling your partner.” And she grinned in a malicious manner.

“What?!” But even as the other shoe dropped, she heard a screech behind her. Spinning on her heels, she saw Eile, wearing plate and chain armour, charge her as she brandished a sword ready to chop her skull. She got her quarterstaff up in time to block and deflect the blow, then she danced away from the hole to give herself room to manoeuvre, but Eile followed her without hesitation, slashing, stabbing, and chopping with the blade. She pressed her attack relentlessly and it took all of Sunny’s skill with the ironwood rod to keep Eile at bay. She managed to land a few hits of her own, but the armour absorbed the blows with no harm to Eile.

“Eile, stop! Eile, no!” But she didn’t seem to hear her.

“Eile; don’t you recognize me? Don’t you know who I am?!” But she seemed oblivious. “I’m your partner! Please, stop, I don’t want to hurt you!” She rammed one end of the staff into Eile’s stomach which was protected only by chainmail, doubling her over and giving her a chance to put distance between them.

“That is the point, my dear,” Salamah said as Eile recovered. “You cannot free her from my control, and she will do whatever I command her to do, even kill you. All you can do is surrender to me, or kill her.”

“What?!”

“Yes. If you surrender, I will stop her attack; otherwise you will have to kill her to keep her from killing you. You have no other choice, child.”

Sunny suddenly realized that Salamah counted on her not wanting to risk harm to Eile. She realized the only way out of this dilemma was in fact to risk exactly that.

“There’s always a third option, Bargash.”

“Not this time.” Eile straightened up, raised the sword over her head, screamed a battle cry, and charged.

“Yes there is.” She pointed at Eile. “Sorry partner. Zap!”

Eile became engulfed in the actinic cloud, stiffened and convulsed, and collapsed onto her stomach as soon as the cloud disappeared. Sunny rushed towards her, dropped to her knees, and touched her neck for her pulse, which felt strong.

She sighed with relief. “You’ll be okay, partner. It was all I could think of to save you; I hope you can forgive me.”

Salamah screeched like a banshee as she rose into the air. “You minx! The two of you will pay for your defiance with your lives. If I cannot have control of the Twins, I can at least deny their power to Imperious Mayv!”

She pointed at them and a beam of rosy pink light shot at them. Sunny threw out an arm and a dark green disk formed in front of them. The pink beam struck it, but both turned grey and vanished.

Salamah stared at her in disbelief as Sunny levitated above Eile. “That’s a little trick I learned from the Chromatic Lord. And this is one I learned from his daughter, Vichnia. Shadarak!” Streams of silver fireworks sparks raced towards Salamah. She swept an arm across her torso and a pink cloud formed in front of her. The sparks were absorbed and neutralized, but Sunny followed up by launching a lavender sphere at the sorceress. She didn’t see it in time; it punched through the cloud and hit her in the chest, knocking her back.

As soon as that happened, the nightgaunts clinging to the pinnacles launched themselves into the air and assembled into a giant flock that resembled a great black cloud. Sunny watched them in a nervous manner as she brandished her staff, expecting them to attack at any moment, but suddenly Rabha appeared in their midst, trumpeting a throaty croaking roar, and forced them to scatter.

A few descended towards Eile. “Rabha! Protect Eile!”

The shantak croaked an acknowledgement and dived. The ‘gaunts dodged away from it and it crash-landed, then limped next to Eile and laid on its stomach. The ‘gaunts regrouped and harassed it, but they couldn’t reach her partner.

A shrill yell distracted her, and she saw Salamah had recovered. She threw both hands out in front of her and bolts that looked like pink-coloured Force lightning streaked towards her. She raised the staff to deflect them; they hit with enough force to knock it from her hands. As Salamah made ready to throw another attack, Sunny pointed at her and shouted, “Zap!”, but her *abaya* absorbed the magical electricity as it glowed with rose-coloured light.

Sunny shot up to gain altitude and narrowly missed being hit by a shimmering bolt. She released a swarm of emerald darts, but they bounced harmlessly off a pink shield. She slapped her hands together at arm’s length, and discharged a shockwave that drove Salamah into the floor of the plaza.

Eile awoke, dazed, and shook her head to try to clear it. She raised up and looked around; she found herself lying on the floor of a plaza. She tried to push herself up and realized that she was dressed in a suit of plate and chainmail armour, and holding a longsword, none of which were hers. She couldn’t remember how she came by them, or how she got where she was. She rolled over onto her back—

“Holy Jesus God!” A gigantic shantak stood over her. For a brief moment she assumed it was going to chomp her to bits, but then she spotted the horde of nightgaunts flying around it, harassing it, as it fought back. It caught one in its jaws and crushed it against its teeth, then let it drop. It landed beside her and she stared at it in anxious shock.

“Cripes!” She remembered everything: her kidnapping, the lady sorceress, the brainwashing treatment, fighting Sunny, from which she couldn’t stop herself, and finally Sunny zapping her. That must have broken the sorceress’s control.

She jumped to her feet and scanned the sky. The flock of ‘gaunts was pretty thick, but she realized that she stood on the top of the tower. She managed to see through it as gaps opened from the ‘gaunts wheeling around, and she spotted the sorceress floating in the air above them all. Opposite her, she saw Sunny levitating somewhat above her, and as she watched, her partner unleashed her emerald dart spell, but to no affect. Then she clapped her hands. An invisible force struck the sorceress and drove her back and down to collide with the floor with enough force to throw up furrows of stone on either side.

“That’s my girl,” she muttered with pride.

She sheathed the longsword and sprinted towards one side of the shantak. She climbed its flank to its back, crawled along its spine to the base of its neck, and sat on its shoulders. It twisted its head around and gazed at her with a questioning expression.

“We’ve gotta help her!”

The shantak gurgled, stood up, and hobbled towards the opening to the shaft. It dropped into it, then a lifting force pushed it upwards into the sky above the tower. It spread its wings to catch the air and soared around in a great arc to turn back towards the ‘gaunts.

“Let’s nail those assholes!”

The shantak croaked and dove straight for the flock.

“Yee-haw! Ride ‘em cowgirl!”

Salamah leapt back into the air and let loose with an operatic note as if she was trying to break glass. Sunny crossed her arms in front of her face as the sound blast sent her spinning into a mass of ‘gaunts. They grabbed her and tried to carry her off.

“Zapareeno!” The electrical discharge forced them to let her go, allowing her to pull out her singlestick, but Rabhe ploughed into them, scattering them.

“Sunny!” She did a double-take and spotted Eile sitting on the shantak’s shoulders. “You take care of that bitch; we’ll hold ‘em off!”

She saluted. “Gotcha, partner! Here!” And she tossed her the singlestick. Eile caught it and waved back at her.

Sunny turned to confront Salamah and saw her preparing to launch some kind of massive spell attack. She pointed at her: “Nuke ‘em!”

The sorceress was engulfed in a blinding ball of white light that expanded into a fireball. Sunny resisted the shockwave, but the ‘gaunts fled ahead of it. When the fireball dissipated, however, she saw that the sorceress was unharmed and surrounded by a rose-coloured sphere. She fired a pink ray, and it struck Sunny, stunning her. She fell to the floor of the plaza and bounced before she lay still, the breath knocked out of her. Salamah appeared hovering above her, a wicked grin on her face, as a sparkling ball of rose-coloured energy formed in her right hand.

Rabha swooped down behind her and rammed its head into her back. Sunny watched as she went sailing off out of control, struck a pinnacle, and fell to the floor, seemingly unconscious.

The shantak hovered for a few moments, then landed on its stomach with a thud. Eile jumped down and ran towards Sunny, who threw herself onto her feet and raced to meet her. They collided, wrapped their arms around each other, and held on tight as they kissed each other long and desperately.

After some moments, they moved their heads to touch cheek to cheek. “Oh, I’m so glad you’re okay, partner!” Sunny said.

“Heh, yer glad? But thank god yer okay too.”

“How very touching, children.”

They parted and turned and found Salamah hovering several yards above the floor, a sparkling ball of rose-coloured light in one hand as her face morphed into an expression of fury. “This ends, now!” And she threw the ball.

Sunny pulled Eile close and spread her arms. “Deflector shield!” A shimmering barrier appeared in front of them. The ball struck it, tried to penetrate, then recoiled back at the sorceress. She raised her arms as if to ward it off, a terrified look on her face, but it struck her in the stomach. Her body shifted spectrum to a negative image as a black light aura surrounded her, when it vanished. She dropped after a moment and landed with a heavy metallic thud.

Sunny approached her cautiously as Eile followed, and they found she had been transformed into a statue made of smooth, polished black lead.

“Geezus,” Eile breathed. “That was close!”

“Yeah. But she was right: she did end it.” Sunny nudged the statue with her toe.

“Well, now that that’s all over, you wanna tell me what the freakin’ hell this was all about?” Eile said.

“It’s a long story. Let’s wait until we get back to camp first.”

“Yeah, okay.” Then she grinned. “Besides, we’ve got some unfinished business to attend to.” And she laid a hand on Sunny’s rump.

Sunny smiled and crinkled her eyes. “Now who’s being frisky?” And she giggled as they walked back to the shantak.

A NEW DREAMLAND STORY BEGINS NEXT WEEK

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BURN, WITCH, BURN by A Merritt

XIV.—The Doll-Maker Strikes

The moment I was out in the street, volition, power of movement, returned to me. In an abrupt rush of rage, I turned to re-enter the shop. A foot from it, I was brought up as against an invisible wall. I could not advance a step, could not even raise my hands to touch the door. It was as though at that point my will refused to function, or rather that my legs and arms refused to obey my will. I realized what it was—post-hypnotic suggestion of an extraordinary kind, part of the same phenomena which had held me motionless before the doll-maker, and had sent me like a robot out of her lair. I saw McCann coming toward me, and for an instant had the mad idea of ordering him to enter and end Madame Mandilip with a bullet. Common sense swiftly told me that we could give no rational reason for such killing, and that we would probably expiate it within the same apparatus of execution with which I had threatened her.

McCann said: "I was getting worried, Doc. Just about to break in on you."

I said: "Come on, McCann. I want to get home as quickly as possible."

He looked at my face, and whistled.

"You look like you been through a battle, Doc."

I answered: "I have. And the honours are all with Madame Mandilip—so far."

"You came out quiet enough. Not like the boss, with the hag spitting hell in your face. What happened?"

"I'll tell you later. Just let me be quiet for a while. I want to think."

What I actually wanted was to get back my self-possession. My mind seemed half-blind, groping for the tangible. It was as if it had been enmeshed in cobwebs of a peculiarly unpleasant character, and although I had torn loose, fragments of the web were still clinging to it. We got into the car and rolled on for some minutes in silence. Then McCann's curiosity got the better of him.

"Anyway," he asked, "what did you think of her?"

By this time I had come to a determination. Never had I felt anything to approach the loathing, the cold hatred, the implacable urge to kill, which this woman had aroused in me. It was not that my pride had suffered, although that was sore enough. No, it was the conviction that in the room behind the doll-shop dwelt blackest evil. Evil as inhuman and alien as though the doll-maker had in truth come straight from that hell in which Ricori believed. There could be no compromise with that evil. Nor with the woman in whom it was centred.

I said: "McCann, in all the world there is nothing so evil as that woman. Do not let the girl slip through your fingers again. Do you think she knew last night that she had been seen?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

“Increase the guards in front and back of the place at once. Do it openly, so that the women cannot help noticing it. They will think, unless the girl is aware that she was observed, that we are still in ignorance of the other exit. They will think we believe she managed to slip out unseen either at front or back. Have a car in readiness at each end of the street where she keeps the coupe. Be careful not to arouse their suspicions. If the girl appears, follow her-” I hesitated.

McCann asked: “And then what?”

“I want her taken—abducted, kidnapped—whatever you choose to call it. It must be done with the utmost quietness. I leave that to you. You know how such things are done better than I. Do it quickly and do it quietly. But not too near the doll- shop—as far away from it as you can. Gag the girl, tie her up if necessary. But get her. Then search the car thoroughly. Bring the girl to me at my house—with whatever you find. Do you understand?”

He said: “If she shows, we’ll get her. You going to put her through the third degree?”

“That—and something more. I want to see what the doll- maker will do. It may goad her into some action which will enable us to lay hands on her legitimately. Bring her within reach of the law. She may or may not have other and invisible servants, but my intention is to deprive her of the visible one. It may make the others visible. At the least, it will cripple her.”

He looked at me, curiously; “She musta hit you pretty hard, Doc.”

“She did,” I answered curtly. He hesitated.

“You going to tell the boss about this?” he asked at last.

“I may or I may not—tonight. It depends upon his condition. Why?”

“Well, if we’re going to pull off anything like a kidnapping, I think he ought to know.”

I said, sharply: “McCann, I told you Ricori’s message was that you were to obey orders from me as though they were from him. I have given you your orders. I accept all the responsibility.”

“Okay,” he answered, but I could see that his doubt still lingered.

Now, assuming Ricori had sufficiently recovered, there was no real reason why I should not tell him what had happened during my encounter with Madame Mandilip. It was different with Braile. More than suspecting, as I did, the attachment between him and Walters, I could not tell him of the crucified doll—and even now I thought of it not as a doll crucified, but as Walters crucified. If I told him, I knew well that there would be no holding him back from instant attack upon the doll-maker. I did not want that.

But I was aware of a most stubborn reluctance to tell Ricori the details of my visit. The same held good for Braile in other matters besides the Walters doll. And why did I feel the same way about McCann? I set it down to wounded vanity.

We stopped in front of my house. It was then close to six. Before getting out of the car I repeated my instructions. McCann nodded.

“Okay, Doc. If she comes out, we get her.”

I went into the house, and found a note from Braile saying that he would not be in to see me until after dinner. I was glad of that. I dreaded the ordeal of his questions. I learned that Ricori was asleep, and that he had been regaining strength with astonishing rapidity. I instructed the nurse to tell him, should he awaken, that I would visit him after I had dined. I lay down, endeavouring to snatch a little sleep before eating.

I could not sleep—constantly the face of the doll-maker came before me whenever I began to relax into a doze, throwing me into intense wakefulness.

At seven I arose and ate a full and excellent dinner, deliberately drinking at least twice the amount of wine I ordinarily permit myself, finishing with strong coffee. When I arose from the table I felt distinctly better, mentally alert and master of myself once more—or so I believed. I had decided to apprise Ricori of my instructions to McCann concerning the abduction of the girl. I realized that this was certain to bring down upon me a minute catechism concerning my visit to the doll- shop, but I had formulated the story I intended to tell -

It was with a distinct shock that I realized that this story was all that I could tell! Realized that I could not communicate to the others the portions I had deleted, even if I desired. And that this was by command of the doll-maker—post-hypnotic suggestion which was a part of those other inhibitions she had laid upon my will; those same inhibitions which had held me powerless before her, had marched me out of her shop like a robot and thrust me back from her door, when I would have re- entered!

During that brief tranced sleep she had said to me: “This and this you must not tell. This and this you may.”

I could not speak of the child-doll with the angelic face and the dagger-pin which had pricked the bubble of Gilmore’s life. I could not speak of the Walters doll and its crucifixion. I could not speak of the doll-maker’s tacit admission that she had been responsible for the deaths that had first led us to her.

However, this realization made me feel even better. Here at last was something understandable—the tangibility for which I had been groping; something that had in it nothing of sorcery—nor of dark power; something entirely in the realm of my own science. I had done the same thing to patients, many times, bringing their minds back to normality by these same post- hypnotic suggestions.

Also, there was a way by which I could wash my own mind clean of the doll-maker’s suggestions, if I chose. Should I do this? Stubbornly, I decided I would not. It would be an admission that I was afraid of Madame Mandilip. I hated her, yes—but I did not fear her. Knowing now her technique, it would be folly not to observe its results with myself as the laboratory experiment. I told myself that I had run the gamut of those suggestions—that whatever else it had been her intention to implant within my mind had been held back by my unexpected awakening -

Ah, but the doll-maker had spoken truth when she called me fool!

When Braile appeared, I was able to meet him calmly. Hardly had I greeted him when Ricori's nurse called up to say her patient was wide-awake and anxious to see me.

I said to Braile: "This is fortunate. Come along. It will save me from telling the same story twice over."

He asked: "What story?"

"My interview with Madame Mandilip."

He said, incredulously: "You've seen her!"

"I spent the afternoon with her. She is most interesting. Come and hear about it."

I led the way rapidly to the Annex, deaf to his questions. Ricori was sitting up. I made a brief examination. Although still somewhat weak, he could be discharged as a patient. I congratulated him on what was truly a remarkable recovery. I whispered to him:

"I've seen your witch and talked to her. I have much to tell you. Bid your guards take their stations outside the door. I will dismiss the nurse for a time."

When guards and nurse were gone, I launched into an account of the day's happenings, beginning with my summons to the Gilmore apartment by McCann. Ricori listened, face grim, as I repeated Mollie's story. He said:

"Her brother and now her husband! Poor, poor Mollie! But she shall be avenged! Si!—greatly so! Yes!"

I gave my grossly incomplete version of my encounter with Madame Mandilip. I told Ricori what I had bidden McCann to do. I said:

"And so tonight, at least, we can sleep in peace. For if the girl comes out with the dolls, McCann gets her. If she does not, then nothing can happen. I am quite certain that without her the doll-maker cannot strike. I hope you approve, Ricori."

He studied me for a moment, intently.

"I do approve, Dr. Lowell. Most greatly do I approve. You have done as I would have done. But—I do not think you have told us all that happened between you and the witch."

"Nor do I," said Braile.

I arose.

"At any rate, I've told you the essentials. And I'm dead tired. I'm going to take a bath and go to bed. It's now nine- thirty. If the girl does come out it won't be before eleven, probably

later. I'm going to sleep until McCann fetches her. If he doesn't, I'm going to sleep all night. That's final. Save your questions for the morning."

Ricori's searching gaze had never left me. He said:

"Why not sleep here? Would it not be safer for you?"

I succumbed to a wave of intense irritation. My pride had been hurt enough by my behaviour with the doll-maker and the manner she had outwitted me. And the suggestion that I hide from her behind the guns of his men opened the wound afresh.

"I am no child," I answered angrily. "I am quite able to take care of myself. I do not have to live behind a screen of gunmen- "

I stopped, sorry that I had said that. But Ricori betrayed no anger. He nodded, and dropped back on his pillows.

"You have told me what I wanted to know. You fared very badly with the witch, Dr. Lowell. And you have not told us all the essentials."

I said: "I am sorry, Ricori!"

"Don't be." For the first time he smiled. "I understand, perfectly. I also am somewhat of a psychologist. But I say this to you—it matters little whether McCann does or does not bring the girl to us tonight. Tomorrow the witch dies—and the girl with her."

I made no answer. I recalled the nurse, and re-stationed the guards within the room. Whatever confidence I might feel, I was taking no chances with Ricori's safety. I had not told him of the doll-maker's direct threat against him, but I had not forgotten it.

Braile accompanied me to my study. He said, apologetically:

"I know you must be damned tired, Lowell, and I don't want to pester you. But will you let me stay in your room with you while you are sleeping?"

I said with the same stubborn irritability:

"For God's sake, Braile, didn't you hear what I told Ricori? I'm much obliged and all of that, but it applies to you as well."

He said quietly: "I am going to stay right here in the study, wide-awake, until McCann comes or dawn comes. If I hear any sounds in your room, I'm coming in. Whenever I want to take a look at you to see whether you are all right, I'm coming in. Don't lock your door, because if you do I'll break it down. Is that all quite clear?"

I grew angrier still. He said:

"I mean it."

I said: "All right. Do as you damned please."

I went into my bedroom, slamming the door behind me. But I did not lock it.

I was tired, there was no doubt about that. Even an hour's sleep would be something. I decided not to bother with the bath, and began to undress. I was removing my shirt when I noticed a tiny pin upon its left side over my heart. I opened the shirt and looked at the underside. Fastened there was one of the knotted cords!

I took a step toward the door, mouth open to call Braile. Then I stopped short. I would not show it to Braile. That would mean endless questioning. And I wanted to sleep.

God! But I wanted to sleep!

Better to burn the cord. I searched for a match to touch fire to it—I heard Braile's step at the door and thrust it hastily in my trousers' pocket.

"What do you want?" I called.

"Just want to see you get into bed all right."

He opened the door a trifle. What he wanted to discover, of course, was whether I had locked it. I said nothing, and went on undressing.

My bedroom is a large, high-ceilinged room on the second floor of my home. It is at the back of the house, adjoining my study. There are two windows which look out on the little garden. They are framed by the creeper. The room has a chandelier, a massive, old-fashioned thing covered with prisms—lustres I think they are called, long pendants of cut-glass in six circles from which rise the candle-holders. It is a small replica of one of the lovely Colonial chandeliers in Independence Hall at Philadelphia, and when I bought the house I would not allow it to be taken down, nor even be wired for electric bulbs. My bed is at the end of the room, and when I turn upon my left side I can see the windows outlined by faint reflections. The same reflections are caught by the prisms so that the chandelier becomes a nebulously glimmering tiny cloud. It is restful, sleep-inducing. There is an ancient pear tree in the garden, the last survivor of an orchard which in spring, in New York's halcyon days, lifted to the sun its flowered arms. The chandelier is just beyond the foot of the bed. The switch which controls my lights is at the head of my bed. At the side of the room is an old fireplace, its sides of carved marble and with a wide mantel at the top. To visualize fully what follows, it is necessary to keep this arrangement in mind.

By the time I had undressed, Braile, evidently assured of my docility, had closed the door and gone back into the study. I took the knotted cord, the witch's ladder, and threw it contemptuously on the table. I suppose there was something of bravado in the action; perhaps, if I had not felt so sure of McCann, I would have pursued my original intention of burning it. I mixed myself a sedative, turned off the lights and lay down to sleep. The sedative took quick effect.

I sank deep and deeper into a sea of sleep—deeper... and deeper...

I awoke.

I looked around me... how had I come to this strange place? I was standing within a shallow circular pit, grass lined. The rim of the pit came only to my knees. The pit was in the centre of a circular, level meadow, perhaps a quarter of a mile in diameter. This, too, was covered with grass; strange grass, purple- flowered. Around the grassy circle drooped unfamiliar trees... trees scaled with emeralds green and scarlet... trees with pendulous branches covered with fernlike leaves and threaded with slender vines that were like serpents. The trees circled the meadow, watchful, alert... watching me... waiting for me to move...

No, it was not the trees that were watching! There were things hidden among the trees, lurking... malignant things... evil things... and it was they who were watching me, waiting for me to move!

But how had I gotten here? I looked down at my legs, stretched my arms... I was clad in the blue pyjamas in which I had gone to bed... gone to my bed in my New York house... in my house in New York... how had I come here? I did not seem to be dreaming...

Now I saw that three paths led out of the shallow pit. They passed over the edge, and stretched, each in a different direction, toward the woods. And suddenly I knew that I must take one of these paths, and that it was vitally important that I pick the right one... that only one could be traversed safely... that the other two would lead me into the power of those lurking things.

The pit began to contract. I felt its bottom lifting beneath my feet. The pit was thrusting me out! I leaped upon the path at my right, and began to walk slowly along it. Then involuntarily I began to run, faster and faster along it, toward the woods. As I drew nearer I saw that the path pierced the woods straight as an arrow flight, and that it was about three feet wide and bordered closely by the trees, and that it vanished in the dim green distance. Faster and faster I ran. Now I had entered the woods, and the unseen things were gathering among the trees that bordered the path, thronging the borders, rushing silently from all the wood. What those things were, what they would do to me if they caught me I did not know... I only knew that nothing that I could imagine of agony could equal what I would experience if they did catch me.

On and on I raced through the wood, each step a nightmare. I felt hands stretching out to clutch me... heard shrill whisperings... Sweating, trembling, I broke out of the wood and raced over a vast plain that stretched, treeless, to the distant horizon. The plain was trackless, pathless, and covered with brown and withered grass. It was like, it came to me, the blasted heath of Macbeth's three witches. No matter... it was better than the haunted wood. I paused and looked back at the trees. I felt from them the gaze of myriads of the evil eyes.

I turned my back, and began to walk over the withered plain. I looked up at the sky. The sky was misty green. High up in it two cloudy orbs began to glow... black suns... no, they were not suns... they were eyes... The eyes of the doll-maker! They stared down at me from the misty green sky... Over the horizon of that strange world two gigantic hands began to lift... began to creep toward me... to catch me and hurl me back into the wood... white hands with long fingers... and each of the long white fingers a living thing. The hands of the doll-maker!

Closer came the eyes, and closer writhed the hands. From the sky came peal upon peal of laughter... The laughter of the doll- maker!

That laughter still ringing in my ears, I awakened—or seemed to awaken. I was in my room sitting bolt upright in my bed. I was dripping with sweat, and my heart was pumping with a pulse that shook my body. I could see the chandelier glimmering in the light from the windows like a small nebulous cloud. I could see the windows faintly outlined. It was very still...

There was a movement at one of the windows. I would get up from the bed and see what it was—I could not move!

A faint greenish glow began within the room. At first it was like the flickering phosphorescence one sees upon a decaying log. It waxed and waned, waxed and waned, but grew ever stronger. My room became plain. The chandelier gleamed like a decaying emerald -

There was a little face at the window! A doll's face! My heart leaped, then curdled with despair. I thought: "McCann has failed! It is the end!"

The doll looked at me, grinning. Its face was smooth shaven, that of a man about forty. The nose was long, the mouth wide and thin-lipped. The eyes were close-set under bushy brows. They glittered, red as rubies.

The doll crept over the sill. It slid, head-first, into the room. It stood for a moment on its head, legs waving. It somersaulted twice. It came to its feet, one little hand at its lips, red eyes upon mine—waiting. As though expecting applause! It was dressed in the tights and jacket of a circus acrobat. It bowed to me. Then with a flourish, it pointed to the window.

Another little face was peering there. It was austere, cold, the face of a man of sixty. It had small side whiskers. It stared at me with the expression I supposed a banker might wear when someone he hates applies to him for a loan—I found the thought oddly amusing. Then abruptly I ceased to feel amused.

A banker-doll! An acrobat-doll!

The dolls of two of those who had suffered the unknown death!

The banker-doll stepped with dignity down from the window. It was in full evening dress, swallowtails, stiff shirt—all perfect. It turned and with the same dignity raised a hand to the windowsill. Another doll stood there—the doll of a woman about the same age as the banker-doll, and garbed like it in correct evening dress.

The spinster!

Mincingly, the spinster-doll took the proffered hand. She jumped lightly to the floor.

Through the window came a fourth doll, all in spangled tights from neck to feet. It took a flying leap, landing beside the acrobat-doll. It looked up at me with grinning face, then bowed.

The four dolls began to march toward me, the acrobats leading, and behind them with slow and stately step, the spinster-doll and banker-doll arm-in-arm.

Grotesque, fantastic, these they were—but not humorous, God—no! Or if there were anything of humour about them, it was that at which only devils laugh.

I thought, desperately: “Braille is just on the other side of the door! If I could only make some sound!”

The four dolls halted and seemed to consult. The acrobats pirouetted, and reached to their backs. They drew from the hidden sheaths their dagger-pins. In the hands of banker-doll and spinster-doll appeared similar weapons. They presented the points toward me, like swords.

The four resumed their march to my bed...

The red eyes of the second acrobat-doll—the trapeze performer, I knew him now to be—had rested on the chandelier. He paused, studying it. He pointed to it, thrust the dagger-pin back into its sheath, and bent his knees, hands cupped in front of them. The first doll nodded, then stood, plainly measuring the height of the chandelier from the floor and considering the best approach to it. The second doll pointed to the mantel, and the pair of them swarmed up its sides to the broad ledge. The elderly pair watched them, seemingly much interested. They did not sheath their dagger-pins.

The acrobat-doll bent, and the trapeze-doll put a little foot in its cupped hands. The first doll straightened, and the second flew across the gap between mantel and chandelier, caught one of the prised circles, and swung. Immediately the other doll leaped outward, caught the chandelier and swung beside its spangled mate.

I saw the heavy old fixture tremble and sway. Down upon the floor came crashing a dozen of the prisms. In the dead stillness, it was like an explosion.

I heard Braille running to the door. He threw it open. He stood on the threshold. I could see him plainly in the green glow, but I knew that he could not see—that to him the room was in darkness. He cried:

“Lowell! Are you all right? Turn on the lights!”

I tried to call out. To warn him. Useless! He groped forward, around the foot of the bed, to the switch. I think that then he saw the dolls. He stopped short, directly beneath the chandelier, looking up.

And as he did so the doll above him swung by one hand, drew its dagger-pin from its sheath and dropped upon Braille’s shoulders, stabbing viciously at his throat!

Braille shrieked—once. The shriek changed into a dreadful bubbling sigh...

And then I saw the chandelier sway and lurch. It broke from its ancient fastenings. It fell with a crash that shook the house, down upon Braille and the doll-devil ripping at his throat.

Abruptly the green glow disappeared. There was a scurrying in the room like the running of great rats.

The paralysis dropped from me. I threw my hand round to the switch and turned on the lights; leaped from the bed.

Little figures were scrambling up and out of the window. There were four muffled reports like popguns. I saw Ricori at the door, on each side of him a guard with silenced automatic, shooting at the window.

I bent over Braile. He was quite dead. The falling chandelier had dropped upon his head, crushing the skull. But Braile had been dying before the chandelier had fallen... his throat ripped... the carotid artery severed.

The doll that had murdered him was gone!

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POLARIS OF THE SNOWS by Charles B Stilson

19: Kalin Wins His Knowledge

FOR fifty miles Polaris and Kalin drove the Sardanian ponies along the Hunters' Road, while the dogs of the pack raced strong and free at the sides of the sledge. Alas, it was now but a five-dog pack! Octavius had given his life in the crater, in the mad fight to avenge the death of Pallas. Two Sardanians had fallen under his gashing jaws when a spear-thrust found his vitals, and in his death-pain he had leaped over the rim of the fire-pit to the molten lake in the depths.

Of the pack remained Juno, Hector, Julius, Nero, and Marcus, the giant leader. Urged on by voice and crack of whip, the ponies tore along the snow-paths, mile after mile. Rose Emer rode on the sledge, and the men beside it with the dogs.

When they had travelled fifty miles or more, the little beasts showed signs of going to pieces, and Polaris halted them. Enough fodder had been taken from the valley to give the animals 'one good meal. The men fed them and made camp.

After the ponies were somewhat rested from their long pull in the snows, Polaris pointed their noses toward home and whipped them into the trail. Tossing their heads in the air, the little beasts set off along the road in a cloud of fine snow-dust upflung from their scurrying hoofs.

"Yonder goeth the last link with thy land, Kalin," said Polaris, as the men and the maid stood to watch the departure of the small horses.

"Aye," replied the priest and smiled. "Now be thy land my land. On to the north," and he pointed ahead with steady hand to where the massive ice barrier stood in their path, its glittering sides gleaming a steely blue in the sunlight. He turned to Rose Emer.

"Lady," he said in the halting English, of which he had acquired a surprising knowledge, considering the few days that had elapsed since he first had heard that tongue—"lady, Kalin—American—now."

"Yes," smiled the girl in answer; "am I not well guarded? Two American gentlemen to watch over me. I could have no better protectors."

Kalin caught the significance of her remark, and smiled his wonderfully sweet, sad smile—the smile that always struck to the heart of Polaris with a prescience of sorrow to come.

Inland they pushed, skirting the base of the towering ice-wall, seeking for some spot where they might pass over or through it. Disaster dogged fast on their heels, waiting to strike.

On the seventh day out from the valley the first blow fell.

They had passed the ice-ridge. After three days of groping along its base, they came to a place where the mighty wall was deeply notched and the slope was less steep. There, aided by a heavy fall of snow, which partly melted and then froze, giving a scant foothold on the ice-hills, they were able to pass.

ONE entire day was consumed in making passage. At length they passed the wall in safety, and found themselves in an apparently interminable stretch of plain and hummock and crevasse, where the going was slow and laborious and exceedingly perilous.

Then the priest fell ill.

Either the unaccustomed fare—their diet now consisted almost entirely of fish and boiled snow water prepared over the little oil stove—or the rigor of the atmosphere and the exertions caused a sudden decline in the bodily powers of Kalin. Strive as he might, his waning strength became apparent and he lagged in the journeying through the steppes of snow.

The capstone of trouble came when his eyes unused to the continual glare of the relentless sun on the fields of snow and the cliffs of ice, gave way to the dread snow blindness, the bite noir of all explorers in polar regions.

For hours he was able to conceal his blindness from his companions. With stubborn will bent to the task, he ran on with the sledge, guiding himself with his hand at its rail, after the last faint glimmerings of sight had vanished. He had a splendid will, and he made it dominate his weakening body long after it seemed that his muscular strength was unequal to the demand of the trail. It was impossible for them to travel as swiftly as they had, but he would not yield to his creeping weakness, and still ran on.

When the darkness fell he was undismayed and said nothing, hoping against hope that it would pass away. He could no longer keep up his pretence, however, at the first camping spot, and his companions saw him groping helplessly once he had quitted the side of the sledge.

His plight struck a chill to the stout heart of Polaris, who realized that in speed lay their only hope of earthly salvation. Bitter weather lay to the north of the ice barrier, and there was almost no game from which to replenish their stock of food. The days of travel had diminished it to the point where a fresh supply had come to be a problem demanding speedy solution.

Now, to accommodate their pace to that of the tottering blind man, or to carry him, nearly doubling the load of the dogs, spelled almost sure defeat.

He gave no inklings of his foreboding to either Kalin or Rose Emer, but cheered the priest as best he might in his affliction, and pressed on with what speed was possible. Three more laps on the journey they made before the steely fortitude of Kalin gave way, and he could no longer force his exhausted limbs to bear the weight of his failing body. In mid-career across the snows, he stumbled from the path and fell prone in lee of a huge drift.

Polaris plucked him from the snow.

“Kalin is outdone!” gasped the Sardanian, “Thou, my brother, and the Lady Rose must go forward and leave me. On to the north, O brother! Kalin dieth!”

“Not so, Kalin,” answered Polaris. “My breath will leave my body before I desert my brother. Didst thou falter in Sardanes, when all were against the strangers? And shall Polaris desert thee now?”

“But for the lady’s sake, thou must,” persisted Kalin. “Thou mayest not fail her, and delay is death.”

“She would not buy even her life at such a price, O Kalin,” said Polaris. “Together we will fare to the north, or together will we keep eternal watch here in the snows.”

Unheeding of the protests of the priest, he carried him to the sledge and rearranged the load on the vehicle, making a place for Kalin at the rear behind the girl. Thus they, took up again the tale of the journey, but more slowly than they had yet travelled, the load taxing the powers of the diminishing team-pack.

Once broken in the pride of his endurance, the priest rapidly lost hold on himself, and his vitality seemed to ooze from him with the passing hours. At the second stop after Polaris had made a place for him on the sledge the son of the snows discovered that one of his legs, which seemed to be paralyzed, was frozen from foot to knee; yet Kalin did not seem to know it.

At the close of a particularly trying march—their going no longer could be called a dash—Polaris made their camp at the sheltered side of one of the hummocks of rock and ice with which the land was sprinkled, and all of them, dogs and humans, slumbered wearily for many hours.

Polaris awoke with a strange weight at his throat. It was the ilium necklace of Kalin, in which glimmered the red stones. He held it up for an instant in wonder at its presence there and then sprang to the priest’s sleeping parka.

It was empty. Kalin was not in the camp!

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